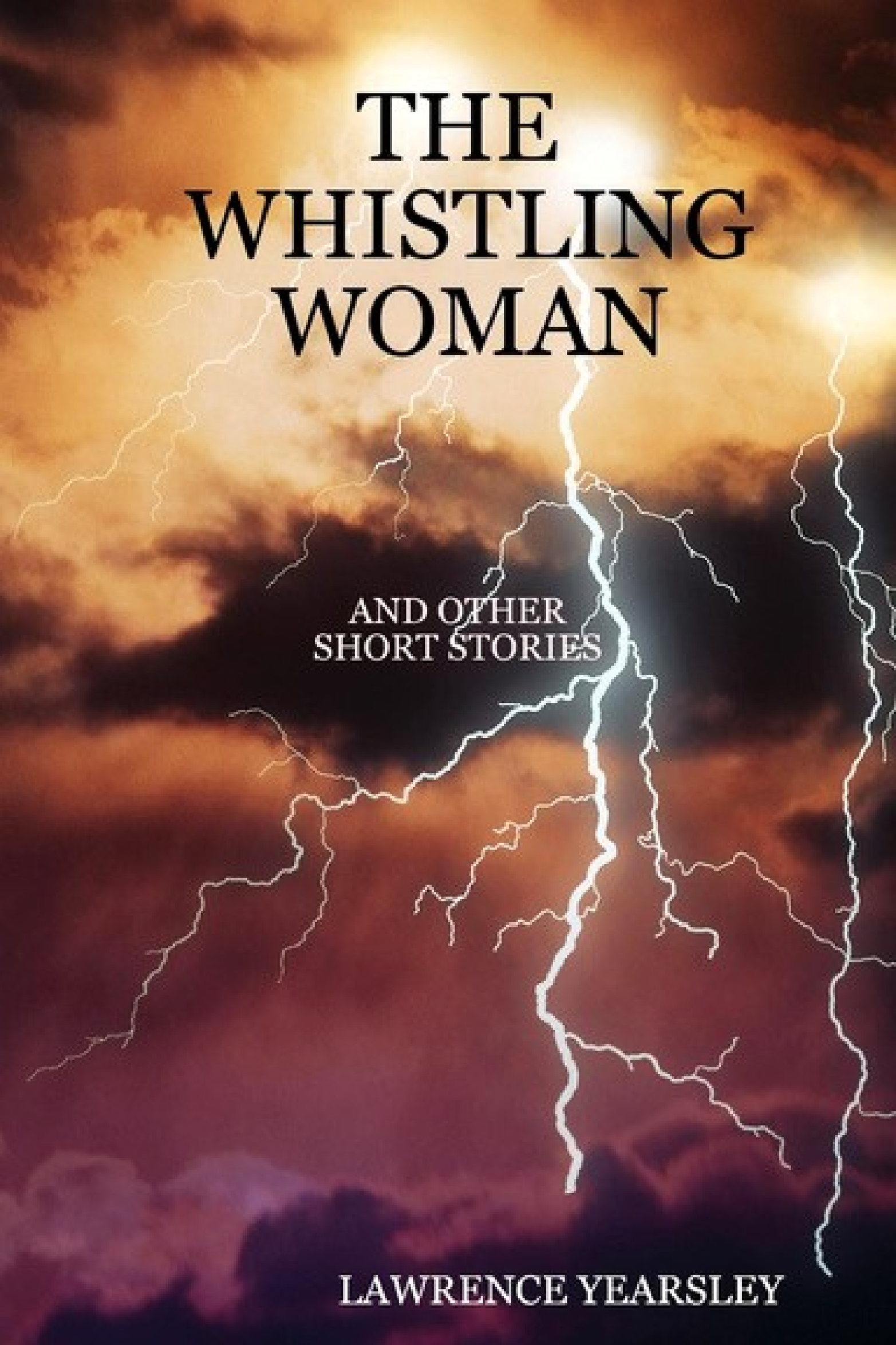
THE WHISTLING WOMAN
AND OTHER SHORT STORIES
LAWRENCE YEARSLEY

The Whistling Woman

And Other Strange Short Stories

An Evocative Collection

Varda Books

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Manufactured in the United Kingdom

ISBN 978 – 1 – 84799 – 166 – 9

For My Family

This book is dedicated to my wife, Elsie,
and to my daughters Melanie, Charmaine and Siobhan.

It is also dedicated to my grandchildren:
Daniel, Charlotte and Caimen,
and those yet to be born.

About the Short Story

A short story can be a simple anecdote of a few hundred words or as many as 15,000 words. It can contain anything from a glimpse of a person's character or incident, up to a highly polished profile of life. The aim of the short story is: to present a work of imagination with as few characters and occurrences as possible, and still be entertaining; I try to achieve this.

The grammar and text I choose to employ in my stories may make academics cringe, and cause literary greats to turn over in their graves, but I believe it is an essential part of my urbanity. *Usus Loquendi.*

About the Author

Lawrence Yearsley: the quiet, shy, family guy, has done it again – given us something weird and wonderful to think about. In his first book he introduced us to the fascinating stories he originally wrote for his family and friends, but in this, his second book, he says he has written it specifically with the public in mind. Which is good news for short-story buffs, because it promises once again to take the reader on an amazing journey of exploration into the canyons of his effervescent imagination.

Contents

Apathy	1
The Demon Drink	3
Kevin and the Tooth Fairy	7
The Whistling Woman	11
Reunited	18
The Feline and The Tramp	21
One Man Went To Mow	27
Early One Morning	33
Scared Stiff	37
I Think I've Heard This One Before	43
Cursery Rhyme	45
The Prince and The Night Pig	53
Sun-Up	57
The Quest	58
Turn of Events	60
Guess Who	64
The Old Man of Smedley Vale	68
Train of Thought	72
Nylon Moon	74

Apathy

Ignorance doesn't have a watch, a clock, or an hourglass, and even if he did, he couldn't tell you the time. For time is altogether meaningless to him. He eats when he's hungry, drinks when he's thirsty, and sleeps when he's tired. The world to him is nothing more than a human tableau, a living waxworks museum; and each and every day he dispassionately meanders his way through it – without giving a second thought for any other living thing.

In the beginning, and nobody is exactly sure when that was, the human race tried dealing with him rationally but he wouldn't even acknowledge their presence, let alone engage in animated conversation with them. So, unless humankind is prepared to join forces, and work together in unison to vanquish him from their world, he is pretty much free to come and go as he pleases. His cold sombre figure, though not always immediately recognised, is unremittingly striking in a frightening sort of way. Men will curse, women will genuflect, and children try to hide whenever he passes them by. He routinely infiltrates people's homes, places of work, schools and churches etc. Nowhere, nothing, and no one, is sacred to him. The annoying thing is, he is only allowed to get away with this because of people's lethargy, and their unwillingness to meet him head on. Sadly, this apathy only serves to make his stranglehold on the world stronger.

Ignorance even manages to make his evil presence felt in the windowless environment of the animal kingdom, as well as on mankind. Beasts behave in the strangest ways whenever he is about. Lions, the so-called intelligent brave and mighty kings of the jungle, will growl and roar at insignificant little flies, and make ineffectual attempts to paw them out of the air. Lemmings, those furry little rodents that love to romp and play about so much, will congregate together in droves. Then, inexplicably, they will hurl themselves to their doom en masse from rocky heights. Even timid little rabbits can come over all inquisitive; and against all their natural instincts be tempted out from the safety of their warrens, only to finish up as a tasty meal for all and sundry. The list, unfortunately, goes on and on.

So it comes as no surprise that wise people everywhere try to avoid him, and give him an extra wide berth. But even these enlightened ones would be surprised to learn that there are some who actually seek him out. These are: 'The Others' – powerful entities, who ever since time immemorial have been searching for him in vain. But unlike you and I, they are not made up of flesh and blood.

That weary old paroxysm of grief, Death himself, together with his trusty scythe cast a grotesque shadow as he waited impatiently at the pre-designated spot in the old priory ruins, but his intended

quarry had failed to show; and he clearly wasn't used to such anomalies. In fact, ever since the wheel of the world first began turning, nothing like this had ever happened before; and he was mystified as to what his next move should be. Two of his old friends, Hunger and Strife, chanced to be passing, On seeing his dilemma they stopped for a chat with him. Hunger; pale and sallow, with his inquiring mind and biting wit, asked, "And exactly who is it you're waiting for?"

"Ignorance," answered Death somewhat peevishly, "but he's late, very late, and this does not bode well for the world."

"You'll be here forever waiting for him," broke in Strife, with his usual pessimism, "he hasn't got a clue about time and its concepts. If I were you, I'd check it out with the chief and see what he has to say about it."

"Good idea," agreed the grim reaper with just a hint of trepidation in his voice, and immediately set about contacting the big boss upstairs. However, he didn't physically need to go heavenward to do this; he simply used his psychic powers that all supernatural beings possess.

On his return, metaphorically speaking of course, his demeanour had changed to that of a scolded child; and I'm sure that if his skeletal head had been adorned in flesh, his mortification would have showed in his features. "The chief is none too pleased about all this," he told his comrades glumly. "In fact he's downright furious, and says Ignorance must be stopped at all costs. He also says, because the mountain won't come to me I must go to it. In other words I've got to seek him out, and you two have got to accompany me."

Hunger and Strife, who were not happy with this proposal but knew better than to argue about it, said nothing. So it was with heavy hearts that the three of them set off on their endless tiresome quest.

And that is how it all began, and how it is still – a deadly game of follow my leader. Always close, but never quite together; a terrifying precedent that has ruled for millennia. Wherever there is ignorance – hunger, strife, and death, are sure to follow.

The Demon Drink

His wife regularly goes hungry, his children have holes in their shoes; his poor parents, whose home he lives in, work seven days a week to give him money. The cupboards are bare and there's almost a year's rent owing, but he doesn't care, he is happy; for John Barleycorn is a drinking man.

A dedicated drinking man, as I'm sure you already know, never has enough money to pay for the important things in life, but he will always find money for alcohol. In this instance John Barleycorn is no different from any other drinking man, but he does possess two traits that are unique to him. Firstly: He has a second wind which, simply put, means although to the casual observer he may look like a man on the verge of alcoholic oblivion, he bounces back with a vengeance. This second coming of his is reminiscent of someone who has just stepped out of a sauna bath; except that John's capacity for alcohol is equal to that of his thirst. Secondly: No matter how much money he goes out with, he always spends up, it doesn't matter if he has ten, or even a hundred pounds in his pockets, the result is always the same – he returns home penniless.

It was All Hallows Eve and one of John's drinking friends had promised to lend him twenty pounds when he came in the pub that night, but his friend had failed to turn up; and John had run out of money while waiting for him. He racked his brain thinking where he could get some money from, he knew asking the landlord for more was a waste of time; he'd already run his bar bill up to its limit. He thought of asking one of the other customers, but for some unknown reason the place was full of strangers this night, and for the first time in his adult life it looked as if he would have to go home relatively sober.

John had been so busy scheming about where he could get money from, that he failed to notice another stranger enter the bar, but he certainly took notice when the man approached his table and said the magic words, "Can I buy you a drink?"

Talk about good timing, John nearly fell off his seat, and trying not to sound too eager he uttered, "Thank you, I'd like that very much."

He eyed the man suspiciously as he paid for the drinks, he couldn't put his finger on it but somehow he knew that tonight was going to be different from any of his normal evenings; but as long as he had a drink in front of him, he was prepared to meet anything that the night could throw at him. The man sat down facing him across the large wooden table that was awash with spilt drinks; he seemed not to notice the spillage as he placed both arms on the table and leaned forward, "You do know who I am don't you?" he asked in a hoarse but not unkind voice.

"You're… you're… not the devil are you?" stuttered John, amazing himself that he'd asked such an incredulous question.

"That's one of my names," admitted the smiling stranger, "But for tonight I think it best if you just call me Nick."

"What do you want from me?"

"It's not so much that I want anything from you, it's more what I can do for you."

Surprised at not being frightened in any way, John warmed to the conversation and asked, "And what exactly is that?"

"Well I know your ambition is to always have enough money in your pocket to get drunk, and I can arrange that for you – how would you like it if every time you put your hand in your trouser pocket, you pulled out twenty pounds?"

For the second time that evening John almost fell off his seat, "I'd like that more than anything else in the world," he replied excitedly, "But how do you know what I want?"

The devil tut-tutted and shook his head in the way that those who know the answers always do. "It's not that I know you personally," he explained, "I know your life. You see, for me to fully understand how you mere mortals think, I have had to live many different lifetimes as one. Over the centuries I have endured life as a murderer, a Holy man, rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief; and even like you, as a drinking man. Which, even though I say it myself, I was very good as."

After downing the first pint in one swallow, John was ready for another drink, which the devil willingly supplied, setting one up for himself at the same time.

John broke the momentary silence, "I suppose you'll be wanting my soul in exchange for these magic pants of yours?"

"Naturally, unless you fancy a gamble."

"What do you mean?"

"Well I'm sure you've heard many stories about me over the years, some of which I must confess are true, but not all of them. One of the true stories is that I love to gamble, but an often uttered fabrication is that I always cheat. I have throughout the decades gambled with hundreds of people for their souls; I've played cards, musical instruments, ran, swam, and many other competitive sports, and even if it is blowing my own trumpet I can honestly say I've never cheated once. On the occasions when I have lost; which I admit isn't often, I've kept my word and granted the winners their wishes, then I've vanished leaving them to enjoy the fruits of their desires."

John stared hard and long at the devil before speaking, "But I don't run or swim, I'm no good at cards, and I can't play any musical instruments."

"No, but you're good at drinking," smiled the devil, "And what I propose is a drinking competition. If you win, I'll make it so that every time you put your hand in your pocket you'll find a twenty pound note, plus I promise never to bother you again. But if I win, I claim your soul right here and now; what do you say?"

Again John thought for a minute before speaking, “It sounds good, but I think we should set a few ground rules before we start, I mean we wouldn’t want anyone getting up to any antics and winning by default would we?”

“Agreed,” nodded the devil with a wan smile, “No magic or dirty tricks of any kind, just a straight forward drink for drink contest, and the first one of us to either vomit, fall asleep, fall over, or refuse a drink is the loser.”

They shook hands and the contest was ready to begin, but first they had to arrange a drink supply. The landlord, who after receiving a substantial amount of cash from the devil, was only too happy to comply with the instruction to keep setting them up.

They started, as John Barleycorn would say, by throwing half a dozen whiskey chasers down their necks. The pace then eased up for an hour or so; and spent drinking pints of draught beer only. Gin was the next tipple on the agenda, which both parties seemed to enjoy; the match was looking fairly even. Then came the brandy period, which John hated; normally just the smell of the stuff was enough to set him off retching, but not tonight. Tonight he daren’t, there was too much at stake; and it wasn’t just money. Concoction after concoction was prepared and brought to their table. The devil had no problem swallowing his measures, but John was struggling; he couldn’t get the harsh and offensive taste of the damned brandy from out of his mouth. He eyed the devil carefully, looking for some sign of weakness or indication that he was feeling the pace. But no, the evil one, with a malignant grin on his face, continued to sit on his stool looking as if he was still on his first drink. A few more whiskey chasers and John could feel himself rocking, his eyelids were feeling heavy and he wanted to close his eyes, but he knew if he did it would be all over; sleep would claim him. The bar, which was by now deserted save for John, the devil and the landlord, was swimming before John’s eyes. He was on the point of succumbing to the affects of the booze when the devil, quite by accident, jarred him into his second wind. Had the devil known how his taunt of, “Have you had enough, John?” would affect John Barleycorn, I’m sure he wouldn’t have made it, but he did make it – and it had the opposite effect to its intent.

To John it was like being woken up from a deep sleep, he felt as fresh as a daisy and ready for beer, “Break out the vodka, Landlord,” he called, then turning to the devil, whose confident expression had now changed to a picture of pure misery, he chimed, “Right, Nick me old mucker, let’s get down to some serious drinking.”

One can never be sure whether it was the change in John’s demeanour, or the direct influence of swallowing a pint of vodka in one go that caused it, but the devil gave up the ghost. He let out a blood-curdling scream, cursed, fell backwards from his stool, and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“Where the bloody hell did he go?” asked the astonished landlord, who had obviously been imbibing somewhat himself.

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” replied John, “Just pour me one more pint of beer and order me a taxi, I’m ready for home.”

His wife eats the finest cuisine, his children wear designer clothes, his parents are retired and live in a luxurious bungalow by the sea. His lavish home hosts all the latest of mod cons, he is rich and he is happy; for John Barleycorn is an altogether sober man.

Kevin and the Tooth Fairy

Kevin Kildogg isn't a bad boy really, he just has this unfortunate knack of getting himself into all sorts of silly scrapes. "You should think more about what you're doing, before you do it," warned his mother one day, after he'd got himself into one particular pickle. But even as she spoke, she knew her words were wasted, and she secretly wished that she had a penny for every time she'd said it.

Kevin; well he couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. That's grown-ups for you, he thought, and carried on being himself.

The two things that Kevin liked best in the world, were; making things, and money. He liked making things because, in his own tinpot way, he was quite good at it. Give him a construction kit and he'd soon whip up a tractor, or a crane, or something, without even looking at the instructions. Not that the instructions were of much use to him anyway, for he couldn't read or write; which always brought him trouble at school – when he bothered to go that is. But he prized money even above this fondness for making things, not because of its monetary value though; he just loved how it felt in his hands. He wasn't all that keen on paper money; albeit he didn't often get given any, you see, paper money doesn't jingle. Coins – now they are a different story. It doesn't matter what denomination they are, as long as there are three or more of them, he can jingle them in his pocket. There is nothing he loves more than walking down the street, with his hand in his pocket, jingling his money. Once, some uncle or other had given him a five pound note for his birthday. He only had it in his possession for a few minutes, before he swapped it for five big pennies with another kid. That was another thing that his mother had made a fuss about. He couldn't understand it, he was happy, the other kid was happy, where's the problem; grown-ups again.

Kevin also had an affection for all things magic; in fact he wanted to be a magician when he grew up. But he wouldn't pull rabbits out of his hat like that stupid man on the telly, no, he'd pull money out instead; coins, lots and lots of lovely coins. Some people just don't know how to use magic properly, he said to himself one day. Take Father Christmas for example, he was alright for bringing toys on Christmas morning, but that's all. Okay, there's nothing wrong with toys, he reasoned, but they don't last like money does. You can break toys, but you can't break money. Fairy Godmothers were the same, they were alright for turning mice into horses, and giving you fancy clothes; but none of that stuff ever lasted. No, if you wanted someone who really knew how to use magic, it had to be the Tooth Fairy. She was someone after his own heart, and only dealt in

cash; cold hard cash. Just how she knew which children had lost teeth, or where they lived, he didn't know. He didn't know how she got in and out of people's houses without being seen either. He just knew she did, that's real magic for you he smiled.

He, because he could be quite bright when he wanted to be, also reasoned that there was a slight downside to the Tooth Fairy too. The trouble is, he thought, she only leaves one coin per tooth, and teeth, well, they have a nasty habit of only coming out one at a time. So, even if he got the tooth out he'd been working loose for the last few days, it would only realize one coin, and everyone knows you can't jingle one coin on its own. He also knew it was a waste of time asking his mum for any money, she had already told him that money was tight this month, something to do with the bills; whoever they were.

Wracking his brain to try and find a solution to his problem, he turned to his mother and asked, "Mum, do you know the Tooth Fairy?"

"Yes, dear," she answered casually, as she hung out her washing.

"Well supposing someone lost three teeth…"

His mother stopped what she was doing, and eyed him with suspicion; she half suspected what was coming next. "Go on," she urged.

"Well if that person – the one who lost the teeth – was to put them all under the pillow, would the Tooth Fairy leave him three coins?"

Mrs Kildogg, who, for fifty, carried her age astonishingly well, could see where this was leading; and decided to nip it in the bud. "No, Kevin," she emphasised, "it doesn't work like that, she only leaves one coin – no matter how many teeth are under the pillow. I mean, you might get silly little boys pulling their own teeth out if she did that, eh?"

Kevin nodded sulkily, but as he turned to go back in the house, he threw one last question at her. "Yeah, okay then, but when she goes out collecting teeth, she must have lots of coins with her, mustn't she?"

Thinking that this was the end of the subject, his mother muttered an absent-minded, "I suppose so, dear, I suppose so."

Like all people with an addiction, because Kevin was most definitely a money addict, when they haven't got the commodity they're addicted to, their cravings grow even stronger – and Kevin's craving for money was at its zenith. He had to get money from somewhere, and a brilliant brainwave had just entered his head. If he could lure the Tooth Fairy into his bedroom, and trap her there somehow, he could get his jingling money off her; whether she liked it or not.

He decided to make a list of all the things he would need to put his plan into action. The fact that he couldn't read or write didn't bother him in the least. He simply marked everything down as an X, with a rough drawing next to it; it was like having his own secret language. The first item on the list was his own tooth; this, he reckoned, was the most important item of all. For it was the bait with which he hoped to lure the Tooth Fairy. Even though the tooth he had chosen to sacrifice was already fairly loose – because he'd been wiggling it about for several days now – it still stubbornly refused to budge. A quick grab and pull, with an old pair of pliers, soon put paid to that little

problem though. The rest of the items, he found in the garden shed. They included: a mousetrap, some fishing line, a couple of small pulleys, and an old brass coal-scuttle. He had no trouble sneaking the stuff into his bedroom; it was Tuesday, and his mother always went round to his Auntie Margaret's on a Tuesday. There was no chance of her discovering his little plan later on either. For she always made the beds up in the mornings, so she had no reason to go into his bedroom until the following day.

Once inside his bedroom, he set about his little project with fervour. First, he placed the coal-scuttle on a shelf directly above his bed. Next, he filled it with stones from the garden. He then attached a length of fishing line to its handle, and ran it down the wall behind his bed; making full use of the pulleys. The other end of the line, he pulled through the gap between the mattress and headboard. Finally, he tied it to the pre-set mousetrap which, together with his tooth, he carefully placed under his pillow. In his imagination, he became a big game hunter, setting snares to catch wild and ferocious beasts. Only in this instance, the bedroom was his jungle, and the Tooth Fairy was his beast. Pleased with his little self, he surveyed his handiwork with pride. This was it then, the trap was set; all he needed now was his quarry.

When his mother arrived back home at teatime, Kevin was waiting for her with a toothless grin on his face.

"My tooth came out, Mum," he told her cheerfully, "so the Tooth Fairy will be coming tonight."

"You didn't pull it out yourself did you?" she challenged him.

"No, Mum, honest," lied Kevin convincingly, flashing her a disarming smile at the same time. "I wouldn't do a thing like that."

Bedtime couldn't come soon enough for Kevin that night, and when it finally did arrive he was upstairs, washed, and in his pyjamas in two minutes flat. But when he climbed into bed, he did it slowly, and with a great deal of care; the last thing he wanted was to set the mousetrap off prematurely.

Mrs Kildogg checked the time on the TV set before switching it off, it was 11.30 p.m. precisely; time for bed. She was just about to go up the stairs, when she remembered Kevin's tooth. So, taking a coin from her purse, which she intended to put under Kevin's pillow in exchange for his tooth, she climbed the stairs, and crept into his room. Slowly and silently, she tiptoed across the floor to his bed. Kevin was sound asleep, so retrieving the tooth and replacing it with money without disturbing him, should be as easy as pie – well, at least that is what she thought. As she gently slid her hand beneath the pillow, her fingers found the mousetrap; and the mousetrap most definitely found her fingers. Snap went the trap, crushing the three middle fingers of her right hand. She immediately let out a piercing scream of pain, whilst instinctively pulling her hand towards her mouth for comfort. This action, as planned, triggered the second half of Kevin's booby trap off – pulling the stone laden coal-scuttle from the shelf. Crash, went the heavy weight down onto poor Mrs Kildogg's head; smashing open her skull, and exposing the grey spongy matter inside. Like an animal that has just been poleaxed, she collapsed into a crimson heap on the floor, blood pumping volumes from her gaping head wound.

The noise from the crash, coupled with Mrs Kildogg's scream, awoke Kevin with a start. It only took a split second for him to realize that his trap had been activated. Leaping from his bed, he raced across the floor, and switched on the light switch by the door. His first impression, when he saw the prostrate body by his bed, was to think; wow, that's a bit big for a fairy. Closer examination of the body however, revealed the shocking truth to him. Feeling slightly unnerved, he sat on the edge of his bed to gather his senses.

Fancy my own mother being the Tooth Fairy all this time without ever telling me about it, he reflected sadly, it doesn't make sense.

Nonetheless, he soon came to terms with it, and dismissed it with his usual, that's grown-ups for you, formula. Then, turning his attention back to the job in hand, he started, "Right – now where's that money?"

The Whistling Woman

Crossing the great cultural divide that exists between all the different races, religions, and colours of the human race, can be, and often is, a dangerous, or even fatal step. Yet, until the world finally opens its eyes, and realizes that although different, we are all equal, and perfectly capable of living together in untainted harmony, we are compelled to leave it to those few brave pioneers who take those first precarious steps towards inter-marriage. This following story is about two such trailblazers.

Tommy Coverdale is a ladies' man, and said to be married to a single life. His job in the construction industry requires that he works away from home for long periods of time which, for reasons best known to himself, suits his romantic inclinations just fine.

Although not a professional builder, he is a half decent brickie, and a pretty good all rounder on a building site.

He was working on the boundary wall of a small industrial estate one day, when he heard an enchanting low melodic whistling; and to him it was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard in his life. The section of wall he was working on was only a few feet away from an existing wall; the other side of which was a caravan site. It was obvious to him that the whistling was coming from there. So, standing on the wall he was building, he leaned forward and peered over the second one. The caravan nearest to him had its back window open, and he reasoned that the wonderful flute-like sound was most definitely emanating from it. Tommy, never the shy one, joined in with the whistling midstream. He knew the tune well as it was one of his own favourite ballads. The whistling from the caravan ceased abruptly, and a mysterious head appeared at its back window; it was the head of a handsome young Gypsy woman.

"Is that you?" inquired the pretty head.

"It was the last time I looked," joked Tommy.

"Oh give over, you know what I mean," laughed the woman, "was that you whistling just then?"

"It certainly was, my love," he boasted, "Tootling Tommy at your service."

The young woman laughed again, "Hang on a minute," she said, and disappeared from view. Less than a minute later she reappeared outside and at the back end of the caravan.

He noticed she looked a little bit on the nervous side, and was forever glancing over her shoulder, "Someone after you?" he inquired, making light of it, but with a genuine interest.

"No, I'm just looking out for my dad," she replied with an uneasy smile. "He doesn't like me talking to men, especially gorgers."

Puzzled, he asked, "What's a gorger?"

"It's not an insult or anything," explained the woman quickly, "it just means non-Gypsy."

"He sounds a bit racist to me."

"I suppose he is really, but he doesn't look at it like that, with him it's more about tradition."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I haven't got the time to explain to you now, I'll tell you another time."

"When?"

"Some other time."

Sensing the opportunity to ask her for a date, he casually suggested, "How about tonight?"

For the third time in less than a minute, he brought a smile to her lips, "Look," she gestured, politely but firmly with her finger. "This is neither the time nor the place for chatting. If you really want to meet me again, be outside the pictures about ten-to-eight tomorrow night. If I'm not there for eight, don't bother waiting any longer; because I won't be coming." She then, without so much as a by-your-leave or anything, waltzed off down the site, leaving poor Tommy bewildered, but happy.

What the woman obviously didn't know was that Tommy was a stranger to the area, in fact it was only his second day in the town. It was doubtful that he could even find his way back to the digs on his own, let alone find this elusive cinema of hers.

"There was so much more I wanted to ask her," he confided to his workmate at breakfast the next day.

His pal, Mark – a joiner he'd worked with many times before and known as a Solomon of saloons – spluttered an inquisitive, "Like what?" as he champed on a bacon sandwich.

"Well… What's your name? Would have been a good question to start with, and I suppose – Which picture house do you mean? Would've been another. Damn it all, Mark," he snorted impatiently, "For all I know there could be half a dozen picture houses around here."

"I can't answer the first question for you, but I can put you out of your misery with the second," replied his mate after taking a swig of tea. "There's only one picture house in this whole town, and we have to pass it on the way to work, so there's no problem there. But I will tell you this much; if you're really planning to meet this Gypsy woman tread carefully – very carefully. It's no secret that the Gypsy men around here are fiercely possessive about their womenfolk, and they don't take kindly to outsiders talking to them."

"Don't you worry about me, pal," scoffed Tommy with a laugh, "I'm big enough to take care of myself."

Later that same night, Tommy was outside the Regal Twins picture house a good twenty minutes earlier than necessary; his date however, left it until the last minute and arrived bang on eight. "So you made it then," smiled the woman, stating the obvious.

"Yeah," grinned Tommy, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Almost indifferently, she responded with, “No big deal, I was coming here anyway.”

This didn’t bother Tommy in the least, he knew it was only a naive form of bravado, intended to show him that she wasn’t all that interested in him, but he also knew it usually meant the opposite. Tommy, being the gentleman that he was, or at least acting the part of one, paid for both tickets. She showed annoyance at this, and insisted he let her pay her own share which he did.

The movie that was showing was one of those Kung Fu epics, but neither of them were really interested in the film. If, as they were leaving the cinema, you would have asked them what the film had been about, neither one of them could have told you much about it; their attention had been on each other and not on what was happening on the screen. As they walked home, Tommy suggested going for a drink to round the night off. She declined on two points, “Firstly,” she said, “my dad and brothers use the pubs around here every night, and if they saw the two of us together, there would be murders. Secondly, it’s very rare I go out at night anyway, but when I do, I’m always home for 10.30 at the latest, so I daren’t go home any later than that, because it would arouse too much suspicion if I did.”

Not at all pleased to hear this news because he was so used to having things his own way, Tommy still managed to keep the disappointment to himself and said nothing. He also felt a little bit frustrated when she wouldn’t allow him to walk her all the way home, and to make matters worse he had to settle for a tiny peck on the cheek, instead of the lingering goodnight kiss he’d been expecting. But for all that, to him, it still had been one of the most exciting nights of his life.

They parted ways on a dimly-lit street corner two blocks away from the caravan site. Again this was her idea; for his own safety she said. He watched until she disappeared from sight then, with a spring in his step and a song in his heart, he floated on back to his lodgings. He had no explanations for the warm satisfying glow deep inside of him, but explanations were purely academic, all he knew was – it sure felt good.

Mark, the colleague he shared a room with, who hadn’t been out at all that evening, was already fast asleep in bed when Tommy entered the room. So he was none too pleased when Tommy shook him from his slumber to tell him about his romantic tryst. “Mark! Mark!” he cried excitedly, as he unceremoniously roused his sleeping friend.

“Ugh,” came from under the sheets, “what’s the matter, what’s up?”

“It’s me – Tommy – are you awake?”

“I bleedin’ well am now,” snapped Mark angrily, shielding his eyes from the light at the same time.

“Sorry about that, mate, but I had to tell somebody about it.”

“About what?” asked the luckless Mark, who by now was fully awake and sitting up in bed.

“About Tatcha, I met her tonight and she’s absolutely brilliant.”

“Hold on a minute will yah? You’ve lost me, who, or what is, Tatcha?”

“God, Mark, I swear you’ve got a memory like a sieve. Remember the Gypsy girl I told you about – the one who whistles?”

“Yeah.”

"Well that's her, that's her name – Tatcha. I met her tonight and we went to the pictures; not that we saw much of the film. We just talked and talked for ages, and it was fantastic, like being in heaven. I've never met anyone like her in my life before, she's… she's… well… you know what I mean – she's different. She makes me feel alive. There's something else too, you know how I never go out with the same bird twice?"

Mark nodded.

"Well I will with her, I have to. So I've arranged to meet her again tomorrow night; and I can't wait."

Even as he spoke, Tommy was secretly amazed that he was capable of such affectionate feelings. He was also aware that he'd let the cat out of the bag, and said too much already.

Mark, who had been listening intently, could hardly believe his ears. For in all the years he had known him, he'd never heard Tommy rant and rave about a woman like this before. "Don't tell me," he started cynically, "that the great Tommy, God's-gift-to-women Coverdale, has been bitten by the love bug; because I don't believe it."

"I didn't say that, did I?" defended the lovelorn builder with mock horror, "I only meant that I quite like her." The turnaround in his words sounded hollow, even to himself. Then he compounded it even further, by adding, "I'll agree, she is a bit of alright, but I've had better; if you know what I mean?"

Unfazed by his buddy's petty attempt to conceal his true feelings, Mark grinned mischievously and said, "I sure do, pal." Then on a more serious note, he added, "But I still think it's an errand to nowhere. If you want my advice – forget her."

Feeling slightly hurt, and acting more than a tad childish, Tommy retaliated with, "Well I don't want your advice, so there. I was only telling you about her; if I wanted advice I'd go to the Citizen's Advice Bureau, so keep your opinions to yourself." No longer basking in the glory of the moment, he made a mental note not to tell Mark anything again. He should keep his big mouth shut, he thought, and keep his stupid notions to himself.

Both men had trouble dropping off to sleep that night – but for two entirely different reasons.

Tommy and Tatcha met several more times after that. But with no transport available, pubs being out of the question, and only one cinema in the town – it was damn well difficult.

"Look," said Tatcha one unpleasant evening, "this is getting ridiculous, we're walking about the streets like a couple of love-struck teenagers, when I've got a perfectly good caravan at home, and it's just sitting there doing nothing."

"But what about your family?" Tommy reminded her.

"Well, we'll just have to be careful then won't we? But I don't think it will be a problem. The only person who ever comes in my place after eight o'clock is my sister; and I'd trust her with my life."

"I'm game for it if you are," declared Tommy with a sparkle in his eye. "Let's go for it."

Tommy's enthusiasm brought back that enchanting smile to sweet Tatcha's face. "Don't go getting any big ideas," she said to him playfully, and gave him a friendly punch on the arm, "I've been thinking about this for a couple of days now, and I've come up with a plan."

"Go on, tell us about it then," he urged, with a sly smile; and still with the sparkle in his eye.

"Well, if you come down the path at the back of the caravan site, the one between the two walls…"

He nodded yes, as a sign of understanding.

"Well, when you draw level with my caravan – you know which one – just wait there until you hear my whistle. When you do hear it, you'll know it's all clear. You can climb over the wall and I'll let you in the trailer; but you'll have to climb in through the back window. I daren't take the chance of you coming round to the front, you might get seen."

"All right," agreed Tommy, "but about what time?"

"Not before eight, but once it's gone eight, and everything's safe, I'll start whistling every ten minutes or so. Remember though, whatever you do, don't come before eight, and don't climb until you hear me whistle."

God, she must think I'm as thick as two short planks, thought Tommy, before agreeing with her little scheme.

They kissed goodnight, and set their game plan for the following evening.

Eight o'clock on the dot Tommy was there. Besides feeling apprehensive with the thought of what lay ahead, he also felt a little bit claustrophobic, waiting in the confines of the narrow gap between the two walls. Fortunately for him, the wall he had to scale, the one that belonged to the caravan site, was made of Yorkshire stone and easy to climb. He'd only been there for five minutes when he heard the familiar melodic whistling of his sweetheart; he responded in kind and ascended the wall.

Tatcha's head, quite comically, was poking out of the back window when he dropped down onto the other side. "Climb through here," she called softly, and pointed to a couple of milk crates which she had thoughtfully put down to aid him. "Mind you don't kick the panels in," she warned as he struggled through the window.

"Don't worry, my love," sang Tommy, with a hint of sarcasm, "I won't kick any panels in, break the window, or anything – honest."

She gave him a gentle shove and said, "You know what I mean, if anyone sees scuff marks on the back of the trailer, they'll know what's been going on."

He gave her a kiss, and she propelled him to the other end of the caravan, where the blinds were carefully drawn.

Tommy didn't know much about caravans, he'd always imagined them to be on the dark side, and somewhat cramped. So he was quite surprised at how bright and roomy they actually were; he was also amazed at the number of porcelain figures and china plates on display.

"Bet they're worth a few bob eh?" he commented, nodding towards a line of Crown Derby plates.

"Never mind them, you daft ha'perth," laughed Tatcha, "come here and give us a cuddle."

Thus the seed was sown, and for the next few weeks, Tommy and Tatcha spent a blissful couple of hours together each night, in the comfort of their own little mobile love nest.

Their love, instead of waning, which was normally par for the course with Tommy, actually blossomed. In fact it grew into a full blown sincere adult relationship. Then soon, like in all genuine loving relationships; talk of marriage eventually manifested itself. Unfortunately, like a lot of plans made in the white heat of enthusiasm, not enough attention was paid to detail. But even though their hopes were riding high; deep down, both of them knew – their gambit was a lot easier said than done.

"If you love me as much as you say you do, and you really want to marry me, but you can't bring yourself to tell your family about me –we'll just have to elope; it's the only option," rationalized Tommy one day, as they were discussing the subject. To lend weight to his argument, he added, "This job I'm on finishes in a few days anyway, and I've got to go back home to Manchester; so we've got to act fast."

Tatcha, taking hold of Tommy's hands, and looking him straight in the eyes, said, "I do love you, and what you say makes sense, but I love my family too; and I really don't want to hurt them. But this… this… running away thing; well it makes me feel like a Machiavellian."

"I've never heard of that, and I don't know what it means, but I do understand what you're going through," consoled her lover, "but you must remember, loving your family is easy. Liking, or agreeing with them isn't; it's not your fault that they're unconventional. I know you don't want to hurt them, but you must realize if what you've told me about them is true, it would be impossible for us to remain here together. My way is the best way, and you know it; and you never know, in time to come, they might just learn to accept me for what I am. But no matter what happens, at least we'll still have each other."

Tatcha knew quite well he was right so, without much more ado, arrangements were made to elope. She, because it was her nature, was loath to leave anything to chance, and insisted he leave it for a couple of days – to give her time to say her one-sided goodbyes. Thus that it was two nights later, and under the cover of darkness, Tommy found himself waiting in his usual spot between the two walls. Only this time it was different, this time would be his last time. Then, after what seemed like a lifetime, the 'all clear' whistle finally came, and the would-be eloper scrambled over the wall.

Tatcha's caravan, with rear window open as usual, was shrouded in darkness which displeased Tommy. For he had expected her to be ready and waiting with bag in hand. So, with a host of butterflies in his stomach, and as much care as he could muster, he climbed in through the unbarred window. Once inside, he gently inched his way through the silent gloom, heading towards the front end of the trailer. He thought he detected a movement, and called her name softly. To his surprise, the light snapped on suddenly – and what he saw before him made his knees go weak and sent a shock of horror down his spine.

For there, on the top bunk, with hands and feet tied together, lay the poor brutalized Tatcha. Only now, instead of looking like the girl of his dreams, she more resembled something from a

nightmare. Her face was so badly bruised and swollen that he could hardly recognise her. But more shocking than this were her lips, or rather the jagged, bunting-like folds of red flesh, that purported to be her lips. They looked to him as if someone had taken a knife, and with the same dexterity as a baker might use in scalloping the edges of his pastry – sacrilegiously sliced them to ribbons. Then, as if to spare him from any further heartache, a stunning blow to the back of his head rendered him unconscious, with the words "She's not the only one in this family who can whistle" ringing in his ears.

So severe was the beating that Tommy sustained in the vicious assault, that it was two weeks before he recovered consciousness – in hospital. The police were on the case of course, but they weren't much help. They told him that because Gypsies were coming and going so frequently on that particular site, they couldn't trace one single person who was there at the time of the attack; and even armed with the name, Tatcha, they fared no better. In fact, they told him that as a result of their inquiries they had discovered that the word 'Tatcha' wasn't a person's name at all – it was simply a Gypsy word meaning 'good', or 'great'.

Tommy, after several months in a hospital bed, eventually made a partial recovery. He also swore a solemn oath to himself that even if it took him for the rest of his life, he would search for, find, and marry his beloved Tatcha.

I have been told, and I have this on good authority, that Tommy is a familiar figure on caravan sites nowadays. No matter what distance, no matter what the elements may throw at him, he will be there. Always watching, always waiting, and always listening – for the whistling woman.

Reunited

The townsfolk of Little Shampton are a pious lot, and they looked on suicide as a transgression of God's laws, which is why there were so few mourners at young Amanda Burton's funeral. Her whole life had been one tragedy after another; orphaned at the age of two she was raised under a rod of iron by a maiden aunt, committed to a wheelchair after a nasty accident when she was sixteen, and then came the straw that broke the camel's back – news from the army that her fiancé had been killed in action while serving abroad. Lance Corporal Duncan MacDonald had cut a stunningly attractive figure as he strutted down Main Street in his number twos, and everyone agreed that together with the wheelchair-bound Amanda, they were the best looking couple for miles around; another thing that everyone agreed on was, it was genuine love and not pity that he felt for her.

Duncan was not the only man to love Amanda, old Levi Goldberg loved her too – but in a completely different and more perverted way. He thought his money could buy anything and anyone he wanted – he was wrong, he couldn't buy Amanda; and she had even slapped his face once for making an improper suggestion to her. We all know that people can't help the way they look, but it must be said, Levi Goldberg is as ugly as sin; and even though he tries to hide it, his nature is as ugly as his face. He is a truly repugnant person – a giant of a man with a deformed head and deaf as a post to boot. His residence is the biggest house in town, and it is next to and part of the local graveyard where the fossilised trees cast their grotesque shadows on its dusty gables. Above his door at the front of the house is a rather gaudy looking wooden sign, which in letters of gold announces, 'Upholstery and Furniture Repairs'. It may seem strange that a town as small as Little Shampton should have its own upholstery business, but one quick glance inside of the house would dispel any ideas of a thriving enterprise. In truth, when Mr Goldberg retired from his upholstery business in London two years earlier, he was not happy in mothballed retirement; so he turned the backroom of his house into a workshop, and busied himself mending the odd chair here and there and selling oddments left over from his city centre shop – this he felt was good enough to justify the pretentious sign. Astonishingly enough though, he had recently been commissioned to re-upholster a three-piece suite for police sergeant Willis from the neighbouring town of Over Shampton, and it was now finished and sitting in his workshop awaiting collection.

Amanda's funeral had taken place at 11 a.m. By the time 11 p.m. came that same night, three out of the four mourners who had attended her service were already in bed asleep, but not the fourth –

for Levi Goldberg had a different plan for his evening, a damned evil and malevolent one at that. The graveyard was so close to his house that it could have easily been conceived as part of his own garden; he only had to take half a dozen steps from his back door before he trod on consecrated ground, but he intended taking slightly more than six steps tonight. The silence from the graveyard was deafening as he, with spade in hand, picked his way carefully through the gravestones. The cool evening breeze fanned his face as the moon lit his path to Amanda's grave; the skeleton of an old dead tree with rugged branches marked the spot where he had stood only a few hours earlier. Helpful heavy rain had soaked the ground making his deed of darkness easier as he dug down to the newly buried coffin. With no consideration for reverence, he smashed off the coffin lid to reveal the sweetly scented Amanda wearing the snow-white ensemble that should have been her wedding dress for a shroud. He carried her lifeless body back to his house and laid it unceremoniously on top of the cutting table in his workshop; his plan was to take from her in death what she had refused him in life. Then suddenly and infuriatingly for Levi, there came a loud banging from his front door.

The doorway to the workshop directly faced that of the front door, so anyone entering through this door could quite easily see into the workshop; this would never do, not with a dead body on view it wouldn't. Fortunately for Levi, he had had the good sense to hang a thick pair of velvet curtains on the door-casing several months earlier, so carefully closing the curtains behind him, he cautiously approached the entrance.

Bang, bang, bang, went the door again, this time the damned thing nearly came of its hinges with the ferocity of the onslaught. "Who's there, what do you want at this time of night?" cried Levi nervously, keeping a safe distance from the door in case it caved in on him.

The banging returned with a vengeance, only this time it was accompanied by the sound of a man's muffled voice.

"What's that you say?" queried Levi, who because of his deafness couldn't be exactly sure what had been said. "You've come for your suite you say? Well it's too late to mess about with at this time of night, go away and come back for it in the morning."

The banging and shouting continued until reluctantly, and with grave misgivings, Levi opened the door expecting to see the uniformed figure of Sergeant Willis standing on his doorstep; he was only half right. It was the uniformed figure of a man standing there alright, but not Sergeant Willis as he had thought – it was none other than the recently deceased Lance Corporal Duncan MacDonald. The young soldier was a shadow of his former self, his normally bright and smart uniform was besmirched with blood and dirt, and the mangled mass of flesh that had once been his face hung limply from his skull like liver on a hook in a butcher's shop window. The dry swollen tumour-like protuberance that used to be, but alas no longer resembled a tongue, lolled wildly about from side to side whilst uttering the words, "I've come for my sweet."

The strain of witnessing such an unnatural scene was too much for old Levi to take in, and with the room swimming before his eyes, he clutched franticly at the searing pain in his chest as his evil heart succumbed to the inevitable.

The mutilated figure of Duncan MacDonald may well have been the last thing that Levi saw in his grim life but, his voice was most definitely not the last sound that he heard. The very last words that he was to hear emitted from behind the curtains, when a strangely familiar female voice sang out, “I’m here my love, I’m here.”

The Feline and The Tramp

The circumstances leading up to the premature death of my nephew's favourite kitten recently, reminded me of a tragic but humorous incident that occurred many years ago.

I was working as a junior reporter for a local newspaper at the time. I must add that the title 'reporter' is one I use very loosely, for most of my time at the paper was spent performing some very un-journalistic duties. However, occasionally I'm glad to say I was allowed to spend a day at the local municipal magistrates' courts, to report on any cases involving local residents. Any aspirations I had of landing a scoop on a grisly murder case, or a million pound robbery, were soon dispelled. For the majority of trials I attended were usually for something trivial, like: failure to pay rates, drunk and disorderly, and the occasional shoplifting charge. Any more serious cases, which the paper knew were forthcoming, were given to senior, or more experienced reporters. Except for on one isolated occasion that is, when a much graver case slipped through their net. The outcome of which could never have been foreseen, even if one had had a thousand crystal balls to gaze in.

You may, or may not, be aware of this, but, the powers of magistrates are severely limited, when compared to those of a high court judge. They can however, if they feel the punishment merits it, try a case, then, if the accused is found guilty, they can send the lawbreaker to a higher court for sentence. One such stipendiary who used to regularly take advantage of this legal manoeuvre, was the right worshipful Mr Henry Soames JP. In truth, he was a bit on the, no, let me rephrase that – he was a lot on the strict side when it came to dealing with offenders, which frequently reflected in the severity of the sentences he imposed on them. Always using the maximum penalty available to him, or as I said earlier, sending the transgresser to a higher court for sentence. Although a strict disciplinarian, there was also another, kinder, gentler side to Mr Soames. He was a passionate lover of animals, especially of cats. So when one poor chap, a vagrant as it happened, was brought before him one day, charged with, amongst other things – animal cruelty, no one held out much hope for the man retaining his liberty, let alone the astounding chain of events that were to eventually serve as his punishment.

The vagrant, tramp, knight of the road, or whatever you wish to call him, was a very well known character locally. He would often do odd jobs for people in return for a meal, or at least for the price of one. He was surprisingly quite proud in his own little way, always refusing direct charity, on the grounds that he never accepted anything for nothing. Some charitable people who were concerned

for his welfare, and his reluctance to accept gifts outright, found a way around this little problem though; by placing, as though they had been left there by accident, packages of sandwiches in strategic places, where they could be sure he would find them. Indeed, he was often spotted sharing these 'windfalls' with the stray dogs of the area.

Although his clothes were well worn, and sometimes threadbare, he was always clean and presentable. Which was a far cry from the pitiable figure he cut, standing in the dock this particular morning.

A night in the cells had done little to enhance his personal appearance. His clothes still bore traces of blood, brain matter, and animal fur and had obviously been slept in. He was unwashed, unshaven, and his tangled mass of black curly hair was reminiscent of that of somebody who had just arrived on the back of a motorcycle.

With a heavily drawn look on his face, and standing forlornly with his head bowed, he trembled nervously as the charges were read out. The two main charges against him were, one: That he did cause unnecessary suffering to a cat, by crushing its skull in with a housebrick. Two: That he did threaten a member of the public with the same brick, causing him to fear for his life. Moreover, that this act resulted in the said member of the public fracturing his leg, and completely ruining his clothing. Or, put another way, the man was obviously trying to claim damages for injury, loss of earnings, and replacement costs for a new suit.

I swear, that if looks could kill, the poor vagrant would have dropped dead on the spot, from the look the magistrate gave him on hearing the charges.

The main witness for the prosecution, and the first to give evidence, was a certain Mr Oliver Ladywell; he was the member of the public I referred to previously. Even in those days, the influence of television programmes on ordinary people was evident because he addressed the court like a well-seasoned professional policeman, which brought a smile to my face, on account of his likeness to the actor who played the bobby in the hit TV series *Dixon of Dock Green*.

"I was proceeding," he started rather pompously, "through a narrow alleyway, and over a rubble strewn croft; which I sometimes use as a short cut. When—"

It was at this point that the magistrate stopped him mid-sentence, and said, "For the benefit of others in court, Mr Ladywell, what exactly do you mean when you say croft?"

"A croft is, or what I mean when I say croft," explained the man hesitantly, "is a piece of spare land where a property has once stood, usually found on street corners; or in this instance, situated between two alleyways."

"Thank you," replied the judge, "I understood what you meant," he smiled knowingly, "but it is my job to make sure others do too. Pray continue."

"As I was saying," continued the man, with a slight air of annoyance in his voice. "I was heading out over this croft, when I spotted someone kneeling, or in a crouched position about twenty yards ahead of me. At first I thought nothing about it, but as I approached, I could see that it was a man with what looked like a brick in his hand; and that is exactly what it was: A housebrick. He seemed to be using it as a makeshift hammer, striking some unseen object on the floor. It was then that I

saw what it was he was striking – the sight of which made my blood run cold – and I froze to the spot. For there on the ground in front of him, looking like something out of a horror film lay the body of a poor ginger tomcat – he was raining blows on its head like a man possessed. There was blood and snot everywhere."

The courtroom fell deathly silent when Mr Ladywell, as though too overcome with emotion to continue, finished speaking. Then, to what he must have thought would add to the overall drama of it all, he held his hand up to his mouth, and took a series of long deep breaths.

Unimpressed with the blatant obviousness of the witness's theatrics, and anxious for the man to press on with his testimony, the judge broke the silence by urging him on with a patronising, "Okay, Mr Ladywell, I'm sure it was most distressing, and I do sympathise with you, but we must press on – what happened next?"

"Well, that's when the man became aware of my presence," resumed the witness with a new found gusto. "I know this for certain, because he sprang to his feet like a startled leopard and came at me menacingly with the brick in his hand—"

Once more the judge interrupted him. "Excuse me, Mr Ladywell," he put in politely, "but is this man; the one you say you saw committing this atrocity, is he in this courtroom today?"

"Yes, Your Worship he is," came the reply.

"Then once again for the court, Mr Ladywell: so we can all benefit from your knowledge, could you indicate exactly which one he is?"

"Yes, sir, I can – that's him there," he said, pointing to the vagrant, who was still standing in the dock with his head bent low.

"Thank you very much," responded the judge with a look of disgust on his face. "I just needed you to clarify that the accused in the dock, and the man you are talking about, is one and the same person. Please carry on from where you left off."

Mr Ladywell, who with evident pleasure was giving the performance of his life, paused for effect before continuing. Then, with all the hand gestures of a silent movie star, and with enough sentiment in his voice to sink a battleship, he recommenced as follows. "As the man approached me, still holding the blood-splattered brick, I thought – God, my end has come. But thankfully, there was something about the mad crazed look in his eyes that kick-started me back into life. Letting out a scream as loud as my lungs would allow, I turned and ran hell for leather back the way I had come – or at least that's what I would have done, if I hadn't tripped over a lump of wood and hurt my leg. Mind you, despite the fact that I was in agony, I still managed to scramble to my feet – and, by the grace of God, get home in one piece. Once safe inside, but still panic stricken, I bolted the door and phoned for the police, who I'm pleased to say arrived some ten minutes later. PC Banks was the first on the spot; I told him what had happened, and he phoned for an ambulance for me. The rest, as they say, is history. I went off to hospital, and PC Banks went in search of Fred."

The instant he had ceased speaking, a puzzled expression appeared on the judge's face which Mr Ladywell read surprisingly quickly, and answered the next question before it was even asked.

"Fred; that's the name of the vagrant, Your Worship."

"You know him then? The vagrant I mean."

"Yes, sir, of course I know him, everyone around here knows Fred."

Furious that he hadn't been informed that the witness, and the accused, were already familiar with each other, the judge was about to utter a few well chosen words of his own – but he never got the chance. The reason being that it was at this moment that the whole proceedings were suddenly brought to a halt. Dozens of people, the majority of whom were women, had simultaneously decided to invade the Hallowed Halls of Henry Soames's courtroom – which, to him, was a crime second only to murder.

Even the constant hammering of his gavel on its stand failed to bring the disruption to hand. It was only when one of the court ushers forced his way through the throng of people and approached the bench, that silence finally reigned. Even then, you could have cut the air with a knife.

"Your Worship, Your Worship," cried the usher, full of alarm because he was aware of the judge's no-nonsense reputation. "I'm sorry for the interruption, sir, but there's been something of a revelation here; things apparently aren't as straightforward as they first seemed. And the prosecution wish to withdraw the charges – with Your Worship's permission that is."

The judge, whose countenance was already bright pink, and turning redder by the second, shook his head reprovingly; now he would have his say. "This is my court," he emphasised in no uncertain terms, "and now that this case has already been laid before me, it is I, and I alone, who will decide if a case is to be dismissed. Now clear the courtroom, because that is precisely what it is: a courtroom, not a cattle market for all and sundry to come and go as they please. Also take notice of this, when I resume in one hour's time from now, I expect, no, I demand, that these proceedings be conducted in a orderly manner. Then, and only then, will I hear this new evidence, or whatever it is you have to offer. And anyone – no matter what their age, sex, or status – who doesn't show this court its due respect, will be sent to prison for contempt. Is that clear?"

The poor browbeaten usher, who had just borne the brunt of the judge's tirade, wisely held his tongue, and acknowledged the bench with a nod of his head.

The judge retired to his chambers to cool his heels; and the court was well and truly cleared.

When the trial re-convened some sixty minutes later, it was a world of difference to the mayhem that had preceded the recess. Granted, it was still full to capacity, with a flotilla of standees at the back, but everything was as it should be – and it was respectfully quiet.

The first person to take the stand after the break was an oval-faced lady called Mrs Shepherdson. She said that she and a group of other mothers, who, after dropping their children off at school yesterday morning, had stopped for their usual morning natter on a pavement adjacent to a busy main road. As they were chatting, they heard the squeal of brakes, and a loud thumping noise behind them. Turning to the main road where the sound had emanated from, they discovered that a small ginger cat had been run over. The car had disappeared, but the cat, with all its hind quarters crushed, lay paralysed on the road. It was obviously in a great deal of pain, and beyond medical help. Time being of the essence, and to save the poor thing from any more unnecessary suffering,

they decided to put it out of its misery as quick as possible; but none of them wanted to do the deed themselves. As it so happened, Fred, the kindly vagrant, was passing. So they called on him, as he was the only man on the spot, to do what had to be done, which he did –thoroughly. Carrying the injured animal up the alleyway to the croft, he used the only tools available to him to end its pain – bricks. She swore upon her oath, that she was unaware of the events that followed concerning Mr Ladywell; which she was sure was just a misunderstanding anyway. Adding, that had she known, she would have lost no time in coming forward sooner. But it was only on discovery of the charges levied against 'Fred' that very morning, that she and others decided to come down to the courts en masse, to act as witnesses and vouch for the good character of the man.

More than half a dozen others gave the same account; and even more, including two policemen, vouched for his good nature. They said that far from being a cruel man, Fred was possibly the kindest man to animals they had ever met.

Even Mr Ladywell, when being cross-examined, had to admit that the crazed look he claimed he had seen in the vagrant's eyes could just as easily have been a wave of sadness on the man, brought on by the grave undertaking he had just carried out. He also admitted, albeit half-heartedly, that when he said, "He came at me menacingly with the brick," it too was something of an exaggeration, and could have simply been the tramp's muddled attempt to explain his seemingly bizarre actions.

Now that he was wholeheartedly convinced of the vagrant's innocence, and following the dismissal of all the witnesses, the judge, pondering his options, sat in silence for a couple of minutes before beginning his summing up.

"In light of this new evidence presented to me," he announced to the court loudly. "I see that what I am actually dealing with here is an act of mercy, as opposed to a deed of darkness." Then turning to face the vagrant, who was still in the dock, and looking like he didn't know if he was coming or going, he added, "And the mournful truth of this dreadful situation, sir, is that this court owes you an apology for the wretched way you have been treated, and an apology you shall have. But before that, I want everyone in attendance here today to know, that as a judge, I am not just here to mete out punishment. I am also here to see that justice is done. And justice I'm pleased to say, can sometimes be in the form of reward as well as punishment. Therefore I order, and this is an order to be carried out forthwith, that this man be taken to a place where he can rest, bathe, and freshen up, and that he be fed a meal of his own choice. Furthermore, I order that the bailiff see to it that he is fitted out with a whole new accoutrement of clothes. And as a final gesture of goodwill, I award him ten pounds from the court funds."

The judge's orders were carried out to the letter, and I, as you will probably have already guessed, got the first big scoop of my career – but the story doesn't end here. You see, there were some pretty drastic changes on the way; so much so that it was almost as if unseen hands had been at work. Firstly: Mr Soames, the magistrate – who, by the way went on to become a high court judge – became a much better person, more tolerant of his fellow man. He realised that sometimes good people do bad things, and vice versa of course. So from then on he judged each case on its own merit – with fairness and an open mind.

Secondly: PC Banks, who also progressed well in his career, became a better policeman. Instead of arresting people on the whim of others like he used to do, he collected more information, and asked questions first, before making a decision whether to arrest someone or not.

Thirdly: Mr Ladywell, who the judge, before his summing up, had called an over-imaginative pipsqueak. Well, he became a reformed character altogether, almost a paragon of virtue. Exchanging his job from that of an insurance clerk to – of all things – a social worker helping homeless people.

Last: But by no means least, there was Fred; the vagrant. Who, all things considered, didn't do too badly out of the whole affair. I mean, he did finish up with a new suit, shirt, shoes, etc –and a tenner in his pocket for his trouble; which was a tidy sum in those days.

Unfortunately though, nobody is really sure what became of him, because, whether by accident or by design, he was never seen in that vicinity again. Which left one question unanswered, and that was – what did he do with the cat's body?

But then again, maybe it was just as well – because everybody knew how much he enjoyed feeding the stray dogs of the area.

One Man Went To Mow

The majority of people who knew him, his parents and teachers included, thought young Alfred Flannigan was a little bit on the slow side. True, he wasn't the sharpest knife in the box, but slow? Never.

Most of his problems, or what the authorities pretentiously referred to as his learning difficulties, stemmed from two facts. Firstly: He was left-handed, and lived in an era when left-handed people were thought to be perverse; sinister even. Which, as you can imagine, made school life intolerably hard for him. Secondly: He found school dull, uninteresting, and pointless. Which, in point of fact was actually the fault of the education system at the time for employing inept antiquarian teaching staff. These so-called pillars of wisdom were shamelessly unqualified individuals, who possessed no teaching skills whatsoever. And to make matters worse, each one of them seemed to have a vicious streak a mile wide down their back.

Alfred was having trouble writing with his left hand as it was, so when they forced him to work with his right one, the result was an ink-splattered illegible mess – a nefarious crime in the eyes of the teachers. And the perpetrators of such crimes, like Alfred for example, all had to be punished. And he was – time and time again.

Most schools in those days had some form of corporal punishment, and in Alfred's it was six of the best on the hands with a leather strap. A simple enough method of chastisement to execute you would think. Yet some, if not all of these so-called teachers were even incompetent at administering this properly. More often than not the strap would miss its target completely, and catch an unsuspecting pupil smartly on the wrists. And it wasn't unusual for the boys, especially Alfred, to be seen walking around school sporting huge nasty red weals on their arms. Once, when one of the teachers, a certain Mr Stockwell, deliberately delivered a stinging, spiteful blow to Alfred's arm, he got a damn sight more than he bargained for.

Hurt, angry, and frustrated, Alfred lashed out and punched the sadistic teacher squarely on the nose, flattening it; and bringing about a premature end to the man's teaching career. Normally, the repercussions of such an action would be swift and severe, and most likely would have involved the police and social services. But, an examination of the boy's injured arms made the headmaster stop, and have a long hard rethink about the incident. It was not, he decided after much consideration, in the school's best interest to pursue the matter further, and the affair was quickly swept under the

carpet. However, this blatant lack of retaliatory action against the boy did not go down well with the other teachers, and together they wholeheartedly wreaked a diabolical campaign of vengeance on the poor lad. And for the next few months they made his life unbearable. Every day he would be singled out for some misdemeanour or other, and find himself on the receiving end of the dreaded strap.

Eventually Alfred had had enough, and took matters into his own hands – he stopped going to school altogether.

Alfred loved animals, and he also loved wide open spaces, particularly grassland. So when he learned that one of the local parks had a pet's corner; that's where he spent his days. It was a happy time for him, lying idly by on the sun-kissed grass, watching the rabbits and other small animals frolicking playfully in the sunshine. No teachers to bawl him out or hit him. No more heartless kids to poke fun at him just because he was left-handed. And last, but by no means least, no more being forced to eat that horrid garbage they had the cheek to call food.

He didn't think of what he was doing as playing truant, but the school did. And on numerous occasions he was dragged, kicking and screaming, back to the dreaded classroom. So frequent were his illicit excursions to the park, that he was eventually hauled up before the juvenile courts and charged with habitual truancy. He must have thought his world was coming to an end when he was sentenced to three years in an approved school.

It came as something of a pleasant surprise to him when he discovered that the approved school was nowhere near as bad as he had expected. In fact, it wasn't as bad as his old school. Of course there were a lot more rules to be observed in this new place, but on the whole, excepting for the spit and polish side to things, most of them were fair. He didn't even mind having to sleep there, although he wasn't all that keen on having to share a dormitory with four other boys, and would have preferred a room on his own. But then again you can't have everything, he reasoned. The school curriculum was much the same as that of a normal school, excepting that there were far more lessons, plus there were evening activities too – hobbies, sports and crafts, etc. And for those who wanted them, there were even extra academic lessons to be had, of which Alfred naturally wanted no part. In due course his left-handedness began to cause him problems again, only this time he wasn't punished for it; not physically anyway. When it was brought to light that the teachers in his old school had been forcing him to hold his pen in his right hand, his new tutors were appalled. "That's outdated and barbaric," they told him. "Learning is difficult enough as it is," they said, "without someone forcing you to do something which is unnatural to you." So a spot of one-to-one tutoring was called for, and the improvement in Alfred's work and attitude was remarkable.

The school, like most institutes, was run on a chain of command basis, with the boys (who were never referred to as prisoners or inmates) on the bottom, and the governor on the top. In-between were the tutors, and the brothers; Roman Catholic priests, who were responsible for the day-to-day running of the place. Plus there was a multitude of domestic staff – gardeners, cooks, nursing staff, etc. The boys established their own chain of command too. Sprogs (newcomers) forming the

underbelly; regulars in the middle; and the veterans or head boys ruling the roost at the top. Alfred aspired to be a head boy himself one day, not because of the power the position would bring him, but because being a head boy usually meant you were ready for leaving. And that is what he desired most – his freedom.

Rules and regulations figured highly in the school's regime, and most of them got broken at one time or another. Yet, the punishments for breaking them weren't fixed. You could break a rule one day and it would be seen as the crime of the century, ensuring a severe punishment. But break the same rule on another day and it might only be seen as a minor infringement, and you could escape with a ticking off.

Each boy received twenty-five pence a week pocket money which they could spend in the tuck shop there. So sometimes a punishment could be in the form of a fine, which was a penalty the boys dreaded most.

Strictly speaking, it was against the rules for any boy to set foot outside the school grounds. But, like open prison, there were no actual physical barriers to prevent them from doing so.

And the boys used to make frequent illegal shopping trips to the nearby town, often bringing odd items of provisions back with them for one or other of the tutors who were willing to turn a blind eye to such things.

Of all the privileges afforded to the boys, compassionate and home leaves were the most sought after. Home leave usually reserved for boys coming to an end of their sentence, and compassionate leave for emergency family issues. And it wasn't unheard of for a boy to cajole his parents into inventing a family crisis – thus getting them leave under false pretences. Alfred was once granted compassionate leave; genuinely as it happened, to attend a family funeral. The funeral took place in Ireland, where most of his family originated from. Everything had gone well until Alfred went and blotched his copybook. Instead of returning directly back to the school the moment he got back to England, he hung around his old haunts and had to be picked up by the police and forcibly taken back. Things were never the same for him after that, because he had tasted freedom – and wanted more.

Approved school isn't like prison – you don't get time off for good behaviour. But there is one way of getting out early, and that is: If a boy's fifteenth birthday should fall during the last six months of his sentence, and he has no black marks against his name, and provided he has a job to go to, he can go before a panel and apply for early release. If he presents his case well enough, and there are no objections, he is quite likely to get it.

Alfred's fifteenth birthday, as bad luck would have it, fell two days short of the required criteria. But it had been known for the panel to be flexible about this, and a day or two either way could be, and frequently was, overlooked.

The panel, consisting of two tutors and a brother, held court in the gymnasium – usually on the first Tuesday of every month. And it was here Alfred found himself making his bid for freedom one warm summer's evening. He was hoping that because he had shown initiative enough to secure a guaranteed job for himself (whilst AWOL) it would sway the panel in his favour; it didn't. His

application, although adequately presented and endorsed by two other tutors, was unequivocally rejected on the grounds of its two-day deficit.

Alfred was devastated; two days, two lousy rotten stinking days, he thought, and they go and knock me back. He wouldn't have minded so much if it had been through his spot of absenteeism, but for two days? At that point in time he hated everyone in the room, and had long ago stopped listening to what they were saying. All he knew was, he had to get out of there and get some fresh air.

Outside, the warm evening breeze did little to abate his feelings of outrage; he bit on his bottom lip as he fought back the tears of frustration that had welled up within him. Something has got to give, he thought – and it's not going to be me. He wanted to exact some kind of retribution on the school; collateral damage if you like. And, if possible, everybody in it. But how? Nearly everywhere was locked up at this time of night, and everything of value had been put away hours ago. He considered breaking some windows, but the only buildings on that side of the campus were the gymnasium and changing rooms, whose windows were only tiny little rectangular shaped things and, besides that, they were so high up he'd probably miss them anyway. With his options being so limited, he could only think of one other thing that might cause a bit of bother, and that was to abscond. That's it, that's what I'll do, he brainstormed, but I won't run. No I'll just walk right out of the damn place, and God help anyone who gets in my way.

His break for freedom didn't take him very far, just to the back of the gymnasium where a chance encounter stopped him in his tracks. It wasn't a meeting of minds, it was man meets machine.

The gardener, or one of his groundsmen, had left a lawnmower out. Normally, all such equipment is locked away out of sight, but obviously someone had blundered. Alfred stopped and stared hard at the giant machine, a million thoughts flashing through his mind. He knew he had to do something with it, but what? It was much too heavy to lift, so throwing it about was out of the question. He didn't have a hammer; and there was nothing lying around, so he couldn't smash it up. And kicking it didn't even bear thinking about. So he did the only thing he could – he pushed it. He wasn't sure what he intended doing with it, whether he was going to push it out of the grounds and dump it, or simply try to trash it. He had no plan, it was purely a spur of the moment thing. But then something strange happened.

As he pushed the mower along, a sudden transformation came over him; it was almost as if he had become one with the machine. Tears, like tiny mountain streams flowed from his eyes and over his cheeks, but these were not tears of anger or of frustration. These were tears of happiness, of satisfaction – elation even. The strangest thing of all was as the machine, with Alfred at its helm and cutting the grass as it went, chug-chugged its way to the far end of the campus, it enamoured itself of him. Their relationship became sensual, erotic almost. Each blade of grass cut from the landscape gave him a feeling of euphoria, he wasn't just cutting it, he was experiencing it. At last he had found what he wanted, this was his calling, this is what he had been put on the earth for.

The failure of Alfred to report back to his dormitory immediately after the tribunal was over, was quickly noticed, and the governor informed. He, fearing the boy had absconded, and being concerned for his welfare at this late hour, notified the police. It was after some time later, when one of the tutors remarked to his colleague that the gardener seemed to be working late, that Alfred was discovered. He appeared before the governor the following morning, charged with yet another breach of the school rules. In his defence, he told of his disappointment at the hearing, he told of his anger at the decision, and of how he nearly did abscond. He also told of his chance finding of the lawnmower, and the magical affect it had on him.

The governor, whose brusque outward appearance did little to belie his true feelings, listened to the boy's story with amusement. Inside he had a heart of gold, and genuinely cared for the boys in his charge. So it was with a mischievous twinkle in his eye that he told Alfred that he had no option other than to find him guilty as charged.

Alfred's heart sank; disillusioned once again, he lowered his head, stared despairingly at the floor, and waited with trepidation to hear his punishment.

The governor could see the poor boy was suffering, so he decided to put him out of his misery. "Your punishment…" he said hesitantly, "shall be that every day during the summer months, when lessons have finished, you will assist the gardener keeping the grounds and sports fields in trim."

Alfred couldn't believe his ears, but when he looked up and saw the big beaming smile on the governor's face, he knew it was true; and once again his hopes rode high. Approved school didn't seem to be so bad anymore – not now he had found something to do that he really enjoyed.

The next two months were like heaven for him. Every afternoon when school was over, he'd cut grass, tend flowerbeds, trim hedges, and generally enjoy himself. The highlight of his day coming when the kindly old gardener let him drive the motorised lawnmower. Before long however, he once more found himself entrenched in turmoil, when the crazy madcap world he seemed to inhabit, fell apart.

The head gardener took ill and died suddenly, and was speedily replaced by an evil fierce looking man; an ex-schoolteacher called Mr Stockwell who almost immediately began making the boy's life a living hell for him. He gave him all the dirty, messy, laborious backbreaking jobs to do, and it goes without saying – he was never allowed to drive his beloved lawnmower again; which upset him most.

One particular rainy afternoon, Mr Stockwell was overheard telling Alfred that he had to cut the grass on the back rugby field, and that he had to do it by hand, using a scythe. Now, anybody who knows the first thing about gardening also knows that unless specifically made to order, scythes are predominantly right-handed instruments. Thus making them almost impossible for Alfred to use properly.

When Alfred, for only the second time of his impoundment, failed to report back to his dormitory on time, a thorough search of the buildings and grounds was organised; where on the back rugger pitch, a gruesome discovery was made. It was the rain-soaked headless body of Mr

Stockwell, together with a bloodstained scythe. Of the head, and of Alfred, there was no sign – and neither have ever been seen since.

How do I know all this you may ask? Well I know because I was there too, I shared a dormitory with Alfred, and more importantly, I was perhaps his one and only friend.

You may also ask why after all this time I mention the incident now. So I will tell you.

On holiday with my family in Ireland recently, my attention was drawn to one of those yellow-coated council workers who ride around on lawnmowers all day. This particular one was cutting the grass by the side of a road we were driving along; he was so close I could easily have reached out of the window and touched him. Naturally I didn't, so I won't say I did, but what I will say is – he looked an awfully lot like Alfred.

Early One Morning

I must be one of the most dull uninteresting people in the world, and believe you me I never wax lyrical about anything. Please don't misunderstand me, I'm not putting myself down or fishing for sympathy or anything. I only mean that nothing unusual or exciting ever happens to me; well except for on one isolated occasion that is. I earn a modest living doing boring things in a boring office, I live in an old dreary house on an even drearier street. I've never ever seen a car crash or a house on fire, and I have never met anyone who's been mugged – get the picture? In fact the highlight of my existence is when I throw caution to the wind and go camping in Derbyshire for a week each year. Not always to the same campsite but always to Derbyshire; I absolutely adore the place, to me it's like nowhere else on earth. It was on one of these annual camping breaks there, that the one and only remarkable event in my life occurred, and it is this event that I want to tell you about.

It was on our first day at Hendam Vale last year when it happened. Steve and Derek, two work colleagues of mine who share my liking for the great outdoors, were going Dutch in a two-berth tent; I, through my own preference, enjoyed a single on my own. As always I was up at daybreak that first morning, and what a damp miserable one it was at that. The sky was grey, dull, and overcast with low hanging clouds; hardly a good start for an alfresco holiday. I dressed and freshened up rather quickly because there was a definite nip in the air. Throwing on my old parka and grabbing my knobbly stick, I strolled around to the tent in which my pals were sleeping. I felt fit and ready for anything, but unfortunately my two colleagues did not. In fact they told me to piss off when I banged on the flap of their tent to rouse them.

Looking at my watch I could understand why, it was still only 6 a.m. "I'll be back about lunchtime," I shouted to them from the safety of my side of the canvas, the response to which was a couple of baneful grunts. So, with a wry smile on my face, I set off alone in the fine rain that had just stated to drizzle down.

The asphalt footpath which ran past our tents and down to the shower block and main entrance was deserted, I could have gone either way, but I opted to turn right and followed it to the top half of the camp. As I had suspected, there was another gate at this end too; a rather nice ornamental one at that. Passing through the gate I crossed over a dirt road and pursued a slightly muddy track through a forest; I was in my element. Deep in happy thoughts I sauntered on, unaware at first of

the growing darkness. Forty minutes into my trek I decided to stop and take stock of the situation, the forest was obviously much larger and denser than I had at first thought; it was also very much darker than it should have been. I could have been forgiven for thinking of myself as a pioneer exploring my way through a Brazilian rainforest, as opposed to a geeky pen-pusher traipsing about a wood in the middle of England. Spinning round and looking back at the way I had just come, I was surprised to see how narrow the track actually was. It was as if the creeping vegetation was threatening to close the narrow path behind me – forcing me onwards. I did go on, stumbling blindly through the undergrowth as I went; half expecting at any minute to meet with a hungry lion or some other such wild animal. After another forty minutes or so I found myself in a large clearing, although it felt more like the clearing had found me.

The sight that met my eyes there was like looking at a page from a picture book; I'd stumbled upon one of those truly exotic Gypsy encampments. Not one of your modern day caravan sites with gleaming caravans like you see nowadays, no cut-glass windows or stainless steel chimneys with Chinaman hats on. Just your good old-fashioned horse-drawn caravans with bow-shaped tops. A curious thing was in the way they were arranged, in a circle of sorts. I don't mean like you sometimes see in cowboy films, where they form a corral to shoot red Indians from behind. No, these were more reminiscent of the numbers on the face of a clock, and they all faced inwards where a solitary caravan stood in its centre. The most striking part of this spectacle, by far, was the sky. This tapestry of dark blue emptiness seemed to hold the whole thing in its grasp, similar to the way an over-cautious parent holds a child. Another thing that struck me as strange was, although I knew it was less than two hours since I had started out, and it was still relatively early – the sky was the wrong colour; it was clearly that of a night sky.

Although innocent at first glance, the whole scene seemed out of place and gave me an overwhelming feeling of apprehension. It was a bit like discovering an elephant's graveyard, we've all heard of them of course, but in truth how many of us really believe they exist? From the spot where I was standing, I could see and hear nothing or no one, the place was totally devoid of life. I felt like the director on the set of a low budget movie, and all I had to do was shout 'action' for the actors to appear and the performance to begin. I never shouted it but, as if on cue and from out of nowhere, they did appear. They arrived en masse from my left, a group of about thirty or forty men, women, and children.

I couldn't help but notice that some of the men were carrying ye old-fashioned lighted torches with them, which didn't do a lot for my already frayed nerves. Thankfully though, they didn't seem to notice me, it was almost as if I wasn't there. The group, who were undeniably Romany Gypsies, were led by the most beautiful looking woman I've ever seen in my life. They walked slowly and silently to the camp's centre, stopping only when they reached the central caravan. The Venus-like female at the front spun around to face the crowd. Raising her arms in victory fashion she began addressing them in a language I couldn't understand. Whatever it was she said to them they seemed to like and were unholily pleased with, because they all began cheering and punching the air with their arms. Turning on her heels and once more putting her back to the crowd, the raven-haired

beauty climbed the few wooden steps up to the caravan and entered – that's when my attention was drawn to the kindling beneath it.

It didn't bear thinking about, but fire was obviously on the agenda, but what could I do about it? Nothing, so that's exactly what I did – nothing. Nerves already on edge, my heart began imitating the thundering of horses' hooves. I knew, and my body sensed, that something bad was about to happen – and it did. One by one and without compunction, each of the torch-wielding men tossed their lighted flares onto the layers of kindling. The caravan must have been as dry as tinder, for within seconds it was engulfed in flames. The flames themselves danced and leapt as though cavorting to some ungodly tune. The mob meanwhile joined hands and screamed themselves hoarse, whilst at the same time engaging in what I can only describe as a dance macabre. My blood ran cold and I froze to the spot, I had absolutely no desire to witness the cremation of a living human being, but I was unable to do anything but watch. Then, call it imagination call it what you want, I heard the most heart-rending, terrifying scream I have ever heard in my life. Whatever it was, it was enough to break the spell, and give me back the use of my limbs. I turned and fled, ploughing blindly back through the forest from which I'd come. It was like running through a gauntlet of green, every tree every branch, bramble and thorn, lashed my face and body as I ran. After what I considered to be a lifetime, I finally arrived at the dirt road that ran behind the campsite. Vaulting over the ornamental gate I raced down to the tent of my friends and burst in like a madman.

Gulping for air, soaking wet, and much to my friends' surprise, I blurted out my incredible story to them. Woefully for me, because I was puffing and panting so much, my friends failed to understand a word I said.

"Whoa, hold on – wait a minute," snapped Steve as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "You're going too fast, slow down a bit and get your breath back."

Impatient though I was to tell everything, I took his advice and waited, but my heart was still pounding like a jackhammer when I retold them of my ordeal.

Derek, visibly annoyed at being disturbed from his slumber, gave me a look of contempt, and turning to Steve he said, "He's getting us at it, it's a wind-up."

I felt my face fall like a barometer in a thunderstorm – I was gobsmacked, in fact I felt so outraged and angry that I was being disbelieved that I could have cried. All I could think to do in response to this accusation, was to mouth as many oaths as I could think of in the vain hope that they would prove my innocence.

"Don't be at it," added Steve, "you've only been gone ten minutes," and pointed to his wristwatch.

Naturally my eyes followed his movement, and sure enough, but to my dismay, it illogically confirmed the time as 6:10. "But that's impossible," I cried and immediately checked my own watch. Which again, to my utter astonishment, also confirmed the same time. To make matters worse, as I stared open-mouthed at the watch that was making a liar of me. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in Steve's shaving mirror, which was hanging on a string from the tent frame. This too

came as a shock, well more than a shock, more like a slap in the face – and it was my face that caused it. I had expected, after my headlong flight through the forest, to find my face cut to ribbons. But no, nothing, not even a scratch – my face was as clean and smooth as a baby's bottom. Neither were there any rips or tears in my clothing, nor any other indication that I had even left the campsite in the first place. It was as if I had imagined the whole damn thing.

Thirty minutes later when my friends were ready, they agreed, albeit with smirks on their faces, to help me retrace my steps. The ornamental gate at the top of the camp was still there, as was the dirt road just beyond it. But my two associates dismissed this with scorn, claiming that in the ten minutes I'd been gone, I'd had plenty of time to get there and back with five minutes to spare. Unfortunately for me and proving, in my friends' eyes that is, that the whole story was a hoax – the forest had vanished into thin air. Oh sure there were trees there alright, but nothing even remotely like I'd described. A small copse is as much as you'd dare call it; and even that would have been an exaggeration. My protests of innocence fell on deaf ears and much sniggering, so, for the sake of a quiet life, I bit my lip and never mentioned the incident to them again. But all that was last year, and now is now.

I shan't pretend that I can give an explanation for this er, little faux pas of mine, because I can't. Whether this macabre act that I witnessed is somebody else's nightmare, and is forever doomed to manifest itself each year, I do not know.

Whether it was an echo of some not-quite-forgotten-incident, I also don't know.

All I do know is, it shouldn't have happened to me; I'm no hero and never have been, I'm just an ordinary guy.

As a result of all this, I have seriously considered giving up camping altogether, but why should I? I mean it's the only bit of pleasure I've got in my life – so I've given up Derbyshire instead.

Scared Stiff

Richard Alweather found it strangely gratifying to watch his own funeral, he found it pleasing that so many tears were being shed over him; but he wasn't exactly happy about being dead. Neither was he happy to see cousin Charles amongst the mourners, after all it was cousin Charles's fault that he was dead in the first place. Well that was Richard's view of things, but he was like that, never willing to take responsibility for his own actions, no matter what went wrong in his life – it was always someone else's fault.

He had been fortunate enough to have been raised in the lap of luxury, and had never wanted for anything in his life, or as we would say; spoiled rotten. Even his ancestral home – the place of his passing, was one of those manors in its own grounds where the common-or-garden person would have to pay if they wished to see the like. Not that it was open to the public, no, all the cobwebbed secret passageways and suits of armour in Alweather House were reserved strictly for family and friends.

Richard had liked to think of himself as a practical joker but, because his pranks were so puerile, most people thought of him as a big kid. In essence he was harmless, harmless to others that is, but as it happens, most definitely not harmless to himself. Indeed, despite his own one-sided opinion of things, it was one of his own juvenile capers that had brought about his own untimely end. His death the previous week, which the coroner had recorded as accidental, had resulted from him getting his foot tangled in a bedsheet and taking a tumble down the stairs. The circumstances of just how he came to be in this precarious position are not as strange as they may sound – it was all to do with spooks and cousin Charles. Earlier in the same day Charles had boasted to him that he wasn't afraid of ghosts, and even added that if he was ever to meet one, he would casually introduce himself to it as he would to any stranger he met for the first time.

We'll see about that, thought Richard to himself, so that night he made an excuse about being tired and went to bed early, knowing full well that Charles would as usual stay up late perusing through the dusty volumes in the library. When midnight came he took a sheet from the bed and draped it over himself to try and look like a ghost; childish we know, but that was Richard all over. His intention was to creep back down the stairs and give Charles the fright of his life, but he never made it, he fell head-first down them instead and broke his neck.

He had started off by pretending to be a ghost, and now he found he was a real one, the only trouble was, it wasn't the least bit like he had imagined. For a start the bedsheet that he'd been wearing when he died was now an integral part of him, he had no idea why this was, it just was. Of course he had tried to take it off, but it wouldn't budge, and after wasting a couple of hours struggling with the damned thing the penny finally dropped and he realised it was here to stay. Another aspect he knew but couldn't explain why was; he would only ever be allowed to haunt one person at any one time. He didn't really see this as a problem though, because he knew exactly who he was going to haunt, and of course this was – cousin Charles.

Every single summer ever since he could remember, Charles Thomkins-Wright had been forced to spend a month's holiday with his cousin, aunt and uncle (Lord and Lady Alweather) at Alweather House. To say he disliked it would be an understatement; he hated it. He despised every inch of the large opulent gardens in which it sat, he couldn't stand its cold grey exterior, and he absolutely loathed the dark gloomy interior with its long dreary passages and high vaulted rooms; but not the library, no, that was a different story. He just loved the library with its musty but alluring smell of old books, given the chance he would have spent his entire holidays in this scholarly environment. But with a childish cousin, grumpy servants, and a household of fresh-air fiends to contend with, his visits there were firmly restricted to late evenings; which is when and where he was on the night that poor cousin Richard departed from the land of the living. He had been totally engrossed in a rare nineteenth-century tome on bio-chemistry at the time, when to his annoyance he was disturbed by a loud thumping noise from outside the room. On opening the library door and stepping out to see what had caused all the commotion, he discovered Richard's prostrate body at the foot of the stairs; initially he thought it was one of Richard's silly little games, but the irregular disjointed position of the body soon told him different. Doctors, although unable to do anything for him except pronounce him dead, were sent for, and then finally, and with great reluctance, the undertaker was called. The funeral arrangements had to be delayed until after the post mortem, but one week later it eventually went ahead.

Charles and a few other mourners returned to Alweather House after the funeral; whereas Lord and Lady Alweather, too upset to face anyone, flew out to their private little retreat in the South of France in order to grieve alone. Richard's ghost was waiting in the family home when the long-faced mourners returned; if he had wished to he could have manifested himself there and then, but being restricted to only one hour a week in which to do his haunting; and because of the darkness of his mind, he chose to wait until the witching hour. The servants were already tucked up in bed when Charles saw the last woebegone mourner off the premises, the grandfather clock in the hall had just struck eleven when he entered the library. Usually on entering the library the very first thing anyone sees is a reflection of themselves in the great Georgian mirror that hangs over the fireplace there, but not this time. Owing to the family's tradition of covering up all the downstairs mirrors so as to not to reflect death, all he could see was an off-white sheet with the outline of the mirror underneath. Unperturbed, he settled down into a nice comfortable armchair and immersed himself

into one of his favourite books. He was so absorbed with his reading that he failed to hear the clock strike twelve; but he did hear a strange noise a short while later.

Mice, thought Charles, I'll have to tell Perkins to get pest control in, but from out of the corner of his eye he spotted something moving between the doorway and the fireplace; something decidedly white. Thinking that the sheet must have slipped off the mirror and a draught was making it flutter slightly, he thought he'd put it back straight away because it would only distract him from his beloved book. He walked over to the spot where it had fallen and stooped to pick it up, but the sheet beat him to it and picked itself up, then uncannily it seemed to hover a few inches above the floor.

"Boo," went the sheet in a voice which wouldn't have frightened a two year old.

For a fleeting second Charles was caught off guard, but he soon recovered, "Is that you under there, Richard?" he challenged with a note of annoyance in his voice.

"Yes it is, except I'm not under it, I am it, or to put it simpler, the sheet and I are one; and it's all your fault."

"My fault – what do you mean my fault, what have I done?"

"It's not so much what you did, it's more what you didn't do."

"Eh, I'm not with you, you're not making sense, stop talking in riddles, man, and say what you mean."

"Well it's like this, old chap, if you had been in your room that dreadful night instead of the library, I wouldn't have needed to come down the stairs, which in turn means I wouldn't have fallen down them. But you weren't in your room, and I did have to come down them, and I did fall, and I did die; so like it or not, it is your fault."

"Hogwash, if you hadn't been acting so childishly in the first place none of that would have happened, so it's your own fault."

"Well I blame you, and you're the one who's going to pay for it, comprehendee?"

"Pay for it, what do you mean I've got to pay for it? Hold on, don't bother explaining, I'm not interested; it's quite obvious that going over to the other side has unhinged you, so just say what you've got to say and get out of here."

"Unhinged, me unhinged? You're the one talking to a bedsheet, old chap! But before I've finished with you you'll be unhinged – you'll be mad, stark staring mad, either that or you'll commit suicide first, this much I guarantee."

"Let me assure you that that will never happen, you see I'm not scared of you, I was never frightened of you when you were living so I'm certainly not scared of you now you're dead, I mean what possible harm can you do to me now?"

"Plenty, cuz, you see some ghosts only haunt certain rooms or buildings etc., and others haunt objects like paintings, and mirrors and things. But I… I'm here to haunt you, it doesn't matter where you go or try to hide or even what time of day or night it is, I'll be there, and believe you me when I do come I'll make sure you're not on your own. Anyone with you won't be able to see or hear me but, they'll be able to see you alright, and no matter how hard you try, you will never

be able to hide your reactions to me. I'm afraid from now on any credibility you have will be gone forever, and I mean forever, because I'm going to haunt you till the day you die, so remember that and weep, my friend. As a favour I'm cutting my visit short this time, but only this once, just to allow you time to let all this sink in, but I'll be back in a week's time – see you soon."

There was to be no sleep for Charles that night, instead he sat contemplating the incredible event that had just unfolded itself before him. Was it a dream, had he imagined it? No, he was much too serious a person to surrender to such fantasies. It had been real alright; but something else was bothering him, something Richard had said, or was it something he had read recently, or possibly both. By the time Perkins brought him his morning coffee at first light the following day, he had the answer, or at least he hoped he had the answer. One week, Richard had said a week before he returns, plenty of time for him to put his plan into action, but why take chances and leave it until the last minute, better to get on with it straight away; besides, he couldn't be sure when Richard's parents would return.

Alweather House was a hive of activity over the next few days; builders up and down the stairs, tankers round the back, and half a mile of trunking fitted to the outsides of the building. When it was at last completed, he smiled to himself and thought, right all I need now is Richard.

Exactly one week to the day Richard returned, Charles was waiting in the library as usual, "Hello, Richard," he said cheerfully, "come to do a spot of haunting? Well go ahead and do your worst."

"Do my worst, don't you mean do my best? You'll have to wait anyway, because I'm saving my best till last. These first couple of visits are just a taster of what I can do, because when I really do get going you'll know about it, and so will anyone with you. You see I don't intend visiting you at night when I do start proper, no siree, I'll catch you when you least expect it. Can you imagine if you're about to give a lecture somewhere, or even if you're attending a seminar with some local bigwigs and I appear? Like I said, they won't be able to see me but, no matter how hard you try you won't be able to ignore me, and it will show, so you may as well say goodbye to your career now, and this will only be the start of things. You've got me for the rest of your life, however, exactly how long that is, is up to you, know what I mean, cuz?"

"Perfectly, but don't go getting your hopes up too high, I've no intention of popping off just yet, not by my own hand anyway. What is more you're starting to get on my nerves now, so I'm going to bed – you do what you like, goodnight, ciao, or whatever it is that ghosts say to each other."

With that he strode out the room and headed up the stairs. "Whoa," cried Richard after him, "you don't get away from me that easily, we've still got the best part of an hour to spend together yet, and I don't intend losing one second of it."

He then flew out of the library and up the stairs ahead of his cousin, the tail end of the sheet accidentally ruffling Charles' hair as he went.

As Charles had hoped, Richard was already in the bedroom when he entered, "Aha! I see you've beaten me here," he smiled.

"Yes, I've told you there is no escape."

Stacked up on the floor in one corner of the room were several small brown cardboard boxes, Charles walked directly over to them, and opening the top box he removed two aerosol canisters from it. Turning round to face his tormentor with a can in each hand he said, "Listen, Richard, this is your last chance, if you promise me now that you'll give up on this mad plan of yours, I'll-I'll promise to let you go back to wherever it is you came from – deal?"

"You promise, what the hell can you promise, come to think of it what the hell can you do anyway, I'm a ghost – remember?"

"Have it your own way then, Richard," sighed Charles with a heavy heart, "do you know what these are?" he asked, holding the canisters out for him to see.

"Air fresheners," came the sarcastic reply.

"Wrong; they're starch," with that he immediately began spraying him with both cans, he sprayed up, he sprayed down, but always circling him, always moving. As soon as one can ran out he'd grab another and start spraying him with that.

"What are you doing, old chap, don't you know you can't do a thing to harm me?" But even as he spoke he knew something was wrong, he felt uncomfortably stiff all over, he tried to move his legs but they wouldn't budge, and his arms fared no better. He tried disappearing but he couldn't, even elevation failed to work; he was well and truly stuck. "What's happening to me, Charles?" he cried panic-stricken, "what have you done?"

"Chemistry, old friend, simple everyday science; you see the chemicals have no direct effect on you yourself, but clothing – or in your case a bedsheet – that's a different kettle of fish. Once they've materialised into the real world they are immediately subject to the laws of physics, and you know what happens when starch is applied to cotton don't you?"

"Yes of course I do, but that's not what I mean. I mean how come it works for you, why has nobody done it before, why don't they use it on other ghosts?"

"I don't know, perhaps no one has thought about it before."

"Well I…" He would have liked to have said much more but he couldn't; his mouth, or rather the slit in the sheet that was acting as his mouth, refused to move.

"What's up, Richard, cat got your tongue, or are you just bored stiff?" He could have gone on much longer with his witticisms, but he was never one to belittle anyone too much, so he just sprayed on in silence. He continued spraying until he had exhausted every single can of starch. "I'm sorry about all this," he murmured apologetically, "but you really did leave me no choice." Ambling across the room he pressed a secret button on the dark oak-panelled wall; and as if by magic, the whole panel slid away to reveal what had once been a priest hole. Except that this obsolete hiding place, built at the time of the Reformation, now more resembled a modern-day shower cubicle than a place of safety for runaway priests.

"This, my friend, I'm sorry to say is where you are going to spend the next fifty years or so. As you can see I've had the old place converted to suit my needs, which are at this moment in time; to stop you at all costs. "These nozzles," he said pointing to the banks of perforated discs that lined the ceiling and walls of the cubicle, "will not have any water running through them when I switch them

on, only starch; thousands of gallons of liquid starch. They've been regulated so that every hour of every day you'll get a blast of it until eventually you congeal into a solid block of starch. Don't go getting any silly ideas of escape either, because I've catered for every conceivable chance of that possibility, and there are none left."

He then carefully lifted his cousin's rigid form up and placed it inside the tiny hidey-hole, "I'm sorry about this, Richard," he apologised for the final time, "but like I said earlier, you really did leave me no choice."

Having said that, and with a slight hint of sadness, he sealed the poor unfortunate Richard in his sticky tomb.

One month later Lord Alweather made a flying visit back to England, "Alicia and I have decided to stay in France," he announced to Charles in an uneven emotional voice. "I, or I should say we, can't find it in our hearts to settle back here now, not with poor Richard gone we can't. You were next in line after him to inherit the house and everything anyway, so you may as well take over now, I think he'd like that. I do miss him you know, he was a real chip off the old block."

"Yes," nodded Charles in agreement, "and thank you."

He was tempted to say, "He's more than a chip off the old block now, Uncle, he is the block." But he didn't, it was too cruel, and besides his uncle wouldn't have known what he was talking about anyway, so he wisely held his tongue.

Alweather House rarely receives visitors anymore, it's as quiet as a grave there nowadays. Whether Charles's calculations are correct, and the block of starch will hold Richard for years to come, still remains to be seen; but one never knows, does one?

I Think I've Heard This One Before

The driver of the yellow coloured pickup truck, one of those big Yankee jobs, had travelled this route many times before, but there was something not quite right about tonight. For a start there was the storm that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, then there was the traffic, or rather the lack of it. He also reckoned that in all the years, he couldn't remember exactly how many, that he had driven down this road before, he had never known it to be altogether so dark, wet, or quiet. He was just pondering all these things over in his mind when he spotted her. Although it was considerably dark, and the girl was at least fifty yards ahead of him, he could still see her quite clearly. Maybe it had something to do with the whiteness of the long old-fashioned lace dress that she was wearing, he wasn't sure. Being magnanimous in his concern for children's safety, he pulled up next to her and wound his window down.

"What's up, little girl, are you lost?" he inquired rather patronisingly, because although the girl was far from being an adult, she was definitely no little toddler either.

The girl shook her head and self-consciously looked down at her feet.

His eyes followed her gaze, which brought his attention to the bicycle on its side next to her on the verge. One quick glance at its twisted front wheel, and the smear of oil on the hem of her long dress was enough to tell him what had happened.

"Had an accident?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

The girl raised her head for a second, nodded, and once more averted her eyes to the floor.

"Is someone coming to pick you up?"

The girl shook her head, this time without looking up.

"Well you can't stand there all night, you'll catch your death, do you live around here?"

Again without speaking, or even bothering to raise her head this time, the girl pointed in the direction the truck was facing. The driver knew there were no houses on that road for at least another mile, come to think about it there weren't any in the other direction either, hence the bike he thought.

"Look," he said, "I'm going that way, I can drop you off." The girl never answered him, but she did begin to shiver. "I know you're nervous," continued the man, "and I know you shouldn't get into cars with strangers, but this is different. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't even talk to a young girl on her own, let alone ask her to get in a vehicle with me. But, being a religious man like

I am, I feel it is my Christian duty to help you. I can't just leave you standing there on your own, you never know who or what will come along next. I promise I mean you no harm, but it is up to you, you can either get in and I'll drop you off at home, or you can stay where you are and I'll wait with you – all night if necessary."

The girl stood motionless for a minute; she then, after what must have been a change of heart, opened the door and climbed in. "Good girl," said the driver, "you know it makes sense," he then engaged first gear and drove off in the direction she had pointed in.

"My, you are a quiet one," smiled the driver, "still, I don't blame you, it's not wise to talk to strangers." He'd only been in fourth gear for two minutes when the girl sat bolt upright and indicated that she wanted him to stop. He could see why too, for he was approaching a neat little terrace of Victorian houses. The row consisted of six dwellings, so he stopped midship and applied his handbrake. "Do you live here?" he asked.

The girl nodded and hastily jumped from the truck, closing the door behind her.

That's strange, thought the driver, I could have sworn I knew all the families that live on this block; they must have moved in recently.

"Hang on a sec," he called to her through the still open window. "Do you want me to come in with you and explain to your parents? I don't want you to get in trouble or anything."

For the first time since they'd met, the girl spoke, "No-no, I'll be alright," she exclaimed with alarm.

He could see she was still nervous so he didn't pursue the matter, choosing to wait until she had passed safely through the gate before driving off. Now I know where she lives I'll pop round tomorrow and see her parents anyway, he contemplated to himself.

On entering the house, the young girl slammed the front door shut behind her and stood with her back to it heaving sighs of relief. Her dad, who was watching the television, turned around to face her. "You're a bit late," he moaned, "I thought that fancy dress party finished two hours ago, I was just starting to get worried."

Relieved to be home safe and sound, she took a deep breath and blurted out her story. She told him about the sudden storm, the accident, and the kind old man in the yellow pickup truck.

"That's odd," said her father scratching his head. "I don't know anyone around here with a yellow pickup, the only one I can even remember was the one that used to belong to the old vicar; but he died thirty years ago."

"I know, Daddy, I know," cried the girl, and rushed into her father's arms.

Cursery Rhyme

I'm bloody-well sick to death of these damn stupid conferences, cursed Orance Jones, under his breath. Why they have to have them so far away from home is beyond me. Over anxious, and for the tenth time in as many minutes, he glanced at the clock on his dashboard. The decimal digits, 16:30, blazed at him like the red hot embers of a dying fire. Half past four already, he thought, and I've still got more than a hundred miles to go. Although the clocks were officially still on summertime, and it was still relatively early, the sky was undeniably fast blackening. He didn't need a meteorologist to tell him there was an ugly storm brewing.

Headlights on, and traffic heavy; and having no, or little choice in the matter, he reluctantly continued on his weary way. Less than a mile further on however, and to his absolute annoyance, he was forced to reduce his speed drastically; almost to a standstill, and drop into first gear. The slow moving river of red tail-lights ahead of him, did nothing to improve his already agitated frame of mind. Overhead warning signals began flashing, 'ROADWORKS AHEAD – DELAYS POSSIBLE.' It's no good telling people now, he thought bitterly. We're already stuck in the middle of it. You should have warned us beforehand, and maybe we could have done something about it. As it was, he had to be content to slowly inch his way along – bumper to bumper, until he got the opportunity to leave the motorway. Which he did, at the very next junction he came to. Down in the mouth, and feeling more than a tad sorry for himself; along with the fact that he didn't have a clue where he was. He found himself with no alternative but to follow his nose, and see where it led Then, from out of nowhere he had, what he called, a flash of inspiration.

The meeting isn't until tomorrow lunchtime anyway, he mused somewhat pensively. So I don't know why I'm rushing about like a blue-arsed fly, I've got all the time in the world to get there. So I may as well book into an hotel for the evening. Yes, that's what I'll do, he convinced himself. Things always look better in the mornings, plus it'll give this filthy storm that's coming a chance to blow itself out.

The last sign he remembered seeing before leaving the motorway was 'Preston'. Unfortunately though, he couldn't remember how many miles it had said. Three or four at most, he guessed; if only he knew which way to go. But, with no motorway lights to guide him, an acute shortage of road signs, and an inky black sky to obstruct his periphery vision – he was well and truly lost. He eventually joined a road originating from God knows where, and followed it with an attitude of, it's

got to go somewhere. Finally, after several miles of meandering dirt and asphalt, he came upon a triangular plot of land at the junction of four lanes. In the centre of the plot lay a huge three-storey timber building, which was lit up like a ship on fire in a sea of blackness. It was obviously a pub; and country pubs (in this instance) he rightly supposed, always have guest rooms. He pulled up in front of the illuminated tavern, just as the first drops of rain began to fall. They were large and heavy, almost as if they were lined with lead; a sure sign of a maelstrom coming. He hastily grabbed his few belongings off the back seat, and dashed helter-skelter into the welcoming oasis. Two seconds later, the heavens opened, and a deluge began to fall.

He found himself in a large, well lit, open-plan room, with nooks and crannies dotted all around its perimeters. Excepting for the abundance of electric wall lights festooned around the room, it was like setting foot in the past. It wasn't exactly his medium, but he was wise enough to know, that to some, it would be seen as an architectural gem. Old swords, pikes, and muskets adorned the oak-panelled walls, punctuated only by paintings of Oliver Cromwell and his generals. From where he was standing, he could see two flights of intricately carved wooden staircases and balusters. The archaic upper quarters to which they led were galleried; and the walls were again, as far as he could see at least, also bedecked with a multitude of weapons and canvasses. The only other customers in the place were a middle-aged couple, sitting motionless in a secluded corner. They seemed oblivious to his presence, and were gazing into each other's eyes like a couple of love-struck teenagers. They were obviously married, he decided; but most likely not to each other.

"Good evening, sir, and welcome to the Cromwell," came a loud cheerful voice from behind him.

Slightly startled, at being caught unawares. Orance spun around to face the voice. It belonged to a ruddy-faced, grey-haired man, standing behind the bar who could easily have been taken for a farmer, but was obviously the landlord.

"Ah, good evening," responded Orance in kind. "I was just taking in these wonderful surroundings, what a delightful old place you have here."

The man nodded a thank you.

After introducing himself, and passing a brief comment on the abominable weather, Orance asked him if he had any vacant rooms for the evening.

"No problem, sir," he replied, trotting round from behind the bar. "As a matter of fact you can have your pick of the rooms. We have no other guests tonight, and judging from the weather we're not likely to get any either." Then, as if to endorse the man's words, a peal of thunder shook the building.

The room he was given was at the end of a very long dismal passage, towards the back of the pub. 'The Best in the House,' is how the landlord had described it. If this is the best, thought Orance, I wouldn't like to see the worst. It was large and low, with diamond-latticed windows. The long whitewashed walls, which were trimmed with Tudor-style wooden beams, paled into insignificance next to the chilling darkness of the austere wooden floor. The outdated four-poster

bed, which was to be his repository for the night, was sadly contemporary to the rest of the furniture. Cold and uninviting is how he deemed it, but on the plus side; it was spotlessly clean.

His attempts to make a couple of calls on his mobile phone failed. He put that down to static electricity from the storm. He wasn't too perturbed though, they weren't all that important and could easily wait until morning. Although tired from the hectic day he'd had, he still considered it too early to go to bed and, not wishing to dilly dally in the sterile environment of his room, he changed from his business suit into some more comfortable, casual clothing and headed back downstairs to the bar for a nice relaxing drink.

As expected, and half pleased that it was, downstairs was deserted. Even Romeo and Juliet from the cosy corner had gone. The landlord, standing behind the bar, and looking like a man who had lost his father's wages, invited him to have a drink. He ordered a whiskey, and settled himself on a stool at the end of the bar.

"Quiet evening," he observed, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Yeah," replied the landlord dolefully, "it's this damn weather, I've never seen anything like it in my life before. And believe you me I've seen a few storms in my time. It'll take a brave soul to venture out on a night like this."

Then once more, as if to re-affirm the landlord's words, the wild but obliging wind rattled the windows and doors – whilst the lightning lit up the heavens like a firework display on November the fifth.

"I see what you mean," remarked Orance, downing his whiskey in one, and ordering another. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "Mind you, you are a bit out of the way here, aren't you?"

"I suppose we are in a way, but that doesn't stop us from being busy – especially in the summer. Now that's the time when we really have our hands full. You know, with this place being steeped in history like it is."

Orance didn't know, and he had no particular wish to know. But he recognised the statement for what it was – a clear-cut invitation to find out why. So, and against his better judgement, he asked the obligatory question, "Really, why's that then?"

This was what the landlord had been waiting for; his cue. Leaning forward over the bar, and in a voice little more than a whisper, he mouthed one word, "Cromwell."

"Cromwell?"

"Yes, Oliver Cromwell, or Ollie as I like to call him. I know that sounds a bit familiar, but after all these years of learning about the man, I feel I know him well enough to be allowed to call him that. In fact, I know things about him that you'd never read in the history books. Take for instance, where was his base, or, where did he come up with most of his ideas? Practically everybody will tell you it was somewhere down south; London, Huntingdon, that way on – except that I know different, because it was here that he did most of his thinking. And by here, I mean this pub itself. It was a tavern then, even in those days. Mind you, it didn't stay one when he got in power, because like you know, he closed every tavern in the country – a dirty trick if you ask me. But like I just said, this really was his main headquarters, especially during the civil war itself."

Oh no, thought Orance, what have I started here? I'm going to get a history lesson now. But out of politeness, and not wishing to offend his host, he interjected with, "Well, I suppose it does explain all the pictures and stuff."

"Of course it does, and a lot more besides. Sometimes I feel more like a curator, than I do a landlord; what with answering questions about him all the time. Although I don't mind admitting, I find it pretty interesting myself. I know I said it before, and it may not look like it to you right now, but that's just down to this frightful weather – we are normally doubly busy here. And I can tell you with impunity, most of our customers want to know the ins and outs of a cat's arse – especially about the great man himself."

Another few whiskies inside him, and Orance began warming to his history lecture. He learned that Cromwell's plan for a 'New Model Army' was formulated inside these very same walls where he sat. He listened, as the landlord told him about the historical re-enactment societies that swarmed to the area every year. He laughed at the idea of grown men running around with toy swords, play-fighting in the fields opposite. But what he found most interesting of all, was when the landlord told him that the origins of the nursery rhyme, 'Goosey, Goosey, Gander' had started there.

"Run that by me again," he said, smiling, "I thought nursery rhymes were just stories made up to entertain children."

"No, not all of them, some are much more sinister than that," explained the landlord; who was now in his element. "Most of them are based on real events. They were only made into rhyme because people found it was easier to remember them that way. It was no good writing things down in those days, hardly anyone could read – more so with the peasants. And it was some years after that before they were adopted by children."

"It just goes to show," chuckled Orance, "you're never too old to learn. From now on, this story is going to be my party piece. No one will believe me of course, but what the heck – it won't stop me from telling it. So please, if you don't mind that is, tell it to me again, I want to make sure I get it just right. But before you do, landlord, let's have another whiskey, and have one yourself – and make them doubles."

The landlord placed the drinks on the bar, and began, "Well it all goes back to Cromwell's time again, when this place was the GHQ for the puritan army. Of course, back in those days, the whole area looked totally different. For a start, there was a town here then. Well, maybe not a town, but a large hamlet of some kind. Anyway, it seems that on one particular night, a stormy one as it happened, a large group of ordinary foot-soldiers – roundheads, as they used to call them – were sheltering in a barn. When lo and behold, they discover the beer supply to this place. No prizes for guessing what happened next – they got stuck into it. And the more they drank, the louder they got, and the louder they got, the angrier they got. Until eventually, bloodthirsty, and fuelled with grog, they went out looking for trouble. And so, on the pretext of doing God's work, by rounding up Catholics and Royalists, which to many of them was one and the same thing. They invaded the town, killing at will. They smashed down doors, dragged people from their beds and slaughtered them in their own homes; it was wanton murder on a grand scale. Nobody knows what happened to

the soldiers who were involved, whether they were punished or not, however I doubt it. But that, my friend, is the origin of the nursery rhyme Goosey, Goosey, Gander. You can bet your life on it. And before you ask, the goosey goosey bit comes from the way the soldiers used to march – goosestep fashion.

"That's brilliant, utterly brilliant," complimented Orance enthusiastically. "I've never heard anything like it in my life before, I can't wait to tell the lads in my local, they'll love it to bits. Mind you, when I come to think about it, it's a good job I didn't live around here in those days."

"Why?" asked the landlord quizzically.

"Well, I'm a Catholic for one thing, maybe not a practising, one, but I'm still a Catholic for all that," he laughed, "and I'm a great believer in the monarchy for another. I just love all the pageantry and stuff that goes with it; pomp and ceremony if you like. And as far as I'm concerned, you can only get that with a royal family – unlike your republican rubbish."

By chance, as he was speaking, he glanced at his watch and became aware of the time. "Whoa," he said, with his tongue in his cheek. "If I don't watch out, it'll soon be too late to go to bed early. And the last thing I want is to oversleep in the morning. Early to bed, and early to rise, and all that."

Then as an afterthought, and pushing his empty glass towards the landlord at the same time, he added, "But I reckon there's always time for one more for the road – same again please."

They made short work of the last two whiskies, and the landlord put their glasses in the washer. Feeling somewhat better, because of the fire in his belly, Orance stood up and straightened the legs of his trousers. The landlord, back to his mournful self, walked over to one of the projecting windows. It was too dark outside for him to see anything clearly, but he could see the rain cascading down the outside of the glass, as though there was someone up on the roof pouring it out of a bucket.

"I may as well lock up for the night," he declared, with a gesture of his hands, "it doesn't look like I'm going to get any more customers tonight, does it?"

"I doubt it very much in this weather," agreed the solitary guest, as he headed for the staircase, "Unless they're ducks."

Orance was halfway up the stairs, when the landlord called after him, "Oh by the way," he said, "If you're up early in the morning and there's no one about, just ring that bell on the wall behind the bar and one of us will come through." He could see a slight look of puzzlement on Orance's face, and even though he didn't have to, he thought he'd enlighten him, because after all, he was a bit special. "Only we, me and the missus that is, don't live here in the pub itself; this is strictly for paying guests, like yourself. We live out back, in what used to be the stables. But one of us is bound to be up, so if you give us a quick buzz on the bell someone'll be through in two shakes of a cat's tail."

"All right, thanks for letting me know, good night then."

On entering his room, Orance instinctively locked the door behind him. Which was not really necessary, as he was the only person on the premises – but old habits die hard. Despite the warm comforting glow in his stomach, the room still felt unnaturally cold. So he lost no time in getting

undressed and into bed. The whiskies had worked wonders for him, and he fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Around 2 a.m. he was awakened by some vague, but highly audible chattering noises. At first he thought it was a dream, or maybe the storm which was still raging on outside. Until they became more distinct, and he determined them to be voices; he also determined that they were coming from downstairs. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have given them a second thought. He would have just put it down to revellers having a late night drink; but something about the voices struck a chord with him. They didn't seem natural. To say nothing of the fact that he was supposed to be alone in the building. He was about to get up and go downstairs to investigate when he suddenly became aware that the voices were getting louder. Then the penny dropped, and he realised that they weren't actually getting louder – they were merely getting nearer. Plus now, there was a new sound, and he didn't like it one little bit. It was the sound of heavy footfalls echoing on wood, large numbers of them – and they were storming up the stairs. He couldn't explain why, yet somehow he knew, or sensed, that something most terrible was at hand – and it instilled him with terror, such as he had never felt before. The incessant caterwauling of the storm, as though in affiliation with the cacophony on the stairs, increased to an ear-piercing pitch. Lightning pulsated through the windows, giving the room an eerie bluish hue.

Oh my God, he thought, my poor dear God.

The footsteps stopped directly outside of his room, but the jabbering of the unintelligible voices continued. Soon there was a frighteningly loud banging on his door. Such was the ferocity of the onslaught, the door, which was quite sturdy, bellied inwards under the strain as though it was going to snap in half. Fear gripped him like a vice. Unable to move, or even speak, it was as much as he could do just to sit there, bolt upright in bed quaking, with his eyes firmly fixed on the door.

Bang, bang, bang, went the door again in timber crunching thumps. This time, cracks appeared in the walls surrounding the architrave, and the hinges rattled in their sockets. This was followed by an almighty crash, as a bolt of lightning blasted its way into his room and struck the door. The effect was devastating, as the door exploded into a thousand pieces. Fragments of wood and splinters, were sent flying to the four corners of the room; some embedding themselves into the walls and furniture. Simultaneously, grotesque wraith-like shapes poured in through the unbarred doorway. Not wishing to look upon whatever evil it was that was coming for him, Orance squeezed his eyes tight shut. But unfortunately, not before he caught a terrifying glimpse of his nemisis – a troop of grave soiled (not so puritan) soldiers. Mostly bone, with misshapen skeletal heads, some of which still had bits of putrefied skin clinging to them; they looked like legions of the devil himself. Each soldier's skull sported a set of gleaming white teeth, which gave the awful impression that they were laughing from beneath their rust-engrained steel helmets. Next, the nerve-jangling clatter of metal against wood, as the malevolent mob rushed across the room to his bedside. That's when the smell hit him. It was the sickening stench of long dead corrupted flesh, oddly mingled with the bouquet of freshly dug earth. This baneful aroma invaded his nostrils, and contaminated his whole being. He would have retched, but none of his functions were working. In desperation, he tried to

think of all the good and happy times he'd had in his life; in the vain hope that it would make this evil go away. He thought of his childhood days, the many Christmases and birthdays he'd spent, unwrapping his presents under the watchful eyes of his loving parents. But nothing worked because, sadly, it was no longer real. However, what was real was that which he was experiencing now – a living nightmare. Real too, were the bony, tendril-like fingers that gripped his ankles and wrists, and tore him from his bed. He felt himself being hoisted aloft where the air was, thankfully, ever so slightly cleaner. He also felt himself being whisked, weightlessly, from the room, and buffeted along the passageway. Then, as suddenly as it had started, all the sensation of movement ceased. Bewildered, and darkly curious, he dared to open his eyes.

To his horror, he found himself hovering precariously above the uppermost step of the steep wooden staircase; he didn't need the gift of second sight to know what was coming next. It may have been the knowledge that some unholy ritual was taking place, or the realisation that his end was up, and he was about to die. But whichever it was, it managed to reinstate him with his lost voice. "Not the stairs," he screamed in terror, "Please not the stairs."

Epilogue

"So there was definitely no one else in the building all night?" reiterated the policeman, the next morning, as he double checked the details in his notebook.

"That's right," confirmed the landlord, mournfully. "He was our solitary guest. As a matter of fact, we only had three customers in the place throughout the entire day. The other two, a courting couple, left early on in the evening – about tea-time. Mr Jones here," he said, pointing to the prostrate bloodied body, at the foot of the stairs. "booked in around 5.30 p.m., had a couple of drinks, said he was having an early night, and went to bed. The place was dead as a nit, and it didn't look like anybody else was going to come in – what with the weather an' all. So I thought sod it, and shut up shop early to have a quiet night in with the wife. We never saw, or heard a sound all night; apart from the storm that is. When I opened up this morning, I found him like this; and even though I could see he was beyond help, I still phoned for an ambulance straight away – it must have been them who contacted the police."

Looking up from his notebook, PC Evans said, "Yes, that's standard procedure, they have to let us know in the event of any sudden, or suspicious deaths. But you did the right thing, doing what you did. And because of what you've told me – him being here on his own all night, the doors still being locked this morning, and no signs of a break in – we can rule foul play out for a start can't we? I've also had a look at his room, and there's quite a mess in there – looks to me like a lightning strike. There were quite a few of them last night; the Fire Brigade were run off their feet." He stopped speaking for a minute, and gave the stairs a last looking over. Satisfied with what he had

seen and heard, he turned to the two paramedics who were enjoying a cup of tea at one of the tables, and announced, “Okay, lads, sorry to spoil your brew, but I’m done here now, take him away when you’re ready.” Then turning back to the landlord, he said, “Well, Oliver, taking into consideration everything you’ve told me, and everything I’ve seen for myself. The only logical conclusion I can come to is, that at some time during the night, lightning, via one of the windows, struck his bedroom door and blew it up. The noise from the strike must have woken him up, because they are noisy buggers; enough to waken the dead, me old mother used to say. Anyway, as I said, he probably woke up and panicked. Most likely the poor guy thought the place was falling down around his ears, and in his haste to get out; still half asleep, he fell down the stairs and broke his neck.”

“Yeah, I’ll go along with that,” agreed the landlord, as though the final decision was his to make, “I mean, there’s no other explanation for it, is there?”

The Prince and The Night Pig
(Almost a fairy tale)

Once upon a time in a faraway land, inside of a golden palace, dwelt a kindly old king and his wife. Although their hearts had desired more, they had only been blessed with one child – a boy, who they named Prince Nonpareil.

Good looks were very much an old tradition in the royal family, and the young prince could, in no way, be accused of breaking this tradition. In fact, so famous were his good looks that he was deemed to be the most handsome man in the realm and, because he was also the sole heir to the throne, the most eligible bachelor too. Many foreign kings and illustrious dignitaries from strange and exotic lands came forward, each offering their daughter's hand in marriage to the prince. However, to their, and to his parents' dismay, the prince always stubbornly refused, telling them, "I, and only I, will choose who is going to be my future queen, and only I will decide when and where that will be."

One fine winter's day, the prince was riding through the kingdom, when he espied a young, dark-haired peasant girl who was digging for wild cabbages in an unploughed field. To him (and only to him) she was the most beautiful girl in the land, and he immediately fell in love with her and carried her off to the palace with him. When he told his parents that he intended to marry this commoner girl, not only were they disappointed, they were truly amazed too. For never once, in the long history of the monarchy, had any royal married so far below themselves before. But nothing they could say was likely to deter him from his mad whim – for he was stubborn, and bound to have his way. So, in less than a week, and against everyone's advice, he married his bumpkin girl.

As was the norm for royalty in those days, they spent their honeymoon confined to the palace and its vast network of gardens and walkways. Only venturing out with a full entourage of courtiers, personal bodyguards, and foot soldiers. For these were dangerous times – usurpers, plotters, and evildoers, lurked around every corner. Even when they slept, armed guards were permanently stationed in the brightly lit passageway outside of their bedchamber; making it impossible for anyone, or anything, to gain access to it without being seen. The only ingress to the room was by means of its two narrow, glassless windows – which, excepting for tiny birds and flying insects, was impossible to access at all. For the bedchamber was safely situated atop of the great eastern tower, some two hundred feet above the dark, stagnant moat below.

They had only been married for a couple of days when the prince first heard the noises. It was the middle of the night, and he'd been in a deep sleep when they wakened him, and it was as much as he could do to keep his eyes open. So when the idea of a scampering mouse entered his head, he readily accepted it as an explanation, and fell back to sleep. The next day however, when he recalled the incident, his curiosity was not quite so easily appeased. That was no mouse, he told himself, whatever animal it was – and he was utterly convinced it was an animal – it was most definitely not a mouse. He instructed that the whole eastern tower be searched, but it proved fruitless. Two nights later, he was again disturbed by the intrusive noises. This time he determined them to be that of a pig, and they were coming from the other side of the room, where his wife's bed was positioned.

Fearing for her safety, because he had heard that pigs sometimes eat people, he called at the top of his voice for the guards. The guards rushed into the bedchamber with swords drawn, and flaming torches in their free hands. They ushered the prince and princess to safety, and conducted a thorough search of the room but, once again, nothing was discovered.

The following evening, and every evening after that, the terrible noises returned. The princess however, claimed not to hear them, which came something of a surprise to the prince, for they were really loud, nerve jangling, slap-you-in-the-face, petulant sounds. A cross, somewhere between the loud snorting of a bronchial pig, and the trill warblings of an out-of-tune old rusty tin whistle.

Each night became a re-run of the night before. They would fall asleep, then the noises would begin, the prince would wake up and call for the house guards – yet when the guards entered they could never find anything. It got so bad that at one point the prince thought he was losing his mind and imagining it all. But, thankfully, that idea was soon dismissed when the guards confirmed that they too – although located outside of the bed chamber – could also hear the nightmarish snortings. In desperation, and acting on advice, the young prince began experimenting in different ways to beat his torment. He tried leaving the candles burning all night, but neither of them got any sleep that way.

He also tried switching rooms, many times, but it didn't work. No matter in which bedchamber they slept, the noises always found him. Things got so bad that the Prince's health began to suffer. This in turn prompted his father; the king, to intervene.

"This has gone on for long enough," he declared angrily. "The time has come for action," turning to the army of bootlickers, and advisers by his side who were feeling slightly uncomfortable because their own advice had come to nothing. He ordered, "Send for – The Great Magus."

Now, The Great Magus – court magician, alchemist, and soothsayer – was thought to be the wisest man in the whole kingdom, and very probably was. That is why in times of major crisis, which the king now deemed this to be, his advice was always sought.

"If anyone can solve this riddle – The Magus can," prophesied the king to his son, confidently.

On his arrival, The Great Magus was immediately escorted into the presence of the king and his son, where he listened attentively to the prince's account of the nocturnal goings on. He then in

turn, interviewed the guards who had also heard the strange noises, and as a final precaution, he examined the main bedchamber itself.

He had of course, even prior to his arrival, already deduced what the problem was, and these inquiries served only to confirm his suspicions. But they also left him in something of a predicament. He knew the prince wanted the truth, but he also knew the prince wouldn't like it if he told him the truth. And anyone foolish enough to upset members of the royal household, unintentionally or not, were liable to lose their heads – and this included magicians. So, not wishing to be parted from his cranium, he chose to resort to subterfuge instead, and concocted an appropriate story, thus.

"There is a demon," he began, slowly and deliberately, "that comes in the shape of an animal. It is an evil nightmare of a creature, called The Night Pig. It was created many eons ago by a wicked warlock. So powerful was this warlock, that although he himself is said to be dead, his evil lives on, and it lives on in the form of The Night Pig. The purpose of this creature was, and still is, to steal the vital life force of ordinary mortals. It does this by crouching on the chest of its victims whilst they are sleeping, from where, nose to snout, it sucks the essence from their bodies. It is invisible to the human eye, and vanishes completely when light is shed on it – that is why it has never been killed or captured."

"Then we are lost," interjected the prince, despairingly. "If we can't see it, or touch it, then we are powerless against it; and it will have my bride."

"Not necessarily so," broke in the magician, to the relief of those around him. "There is a way, but it is a dangerous way," he warned, "the consequences of which; should things go wrong, could possibly prove fatal to the princess."

"Then we must take that risk," ordered the prince, "for she will surely die anyway if we do nothing. And more importantly, if we don't act quickly, I may die before her from sheer lack of sleep. So pray, wise one, tell us your plan."

The magician's plan was unbelievably simple. He told the prince to take his sword to bed with him, and pretend to be fast asleep. Then when he hears the pig noises – without calling for the guards, or lighting a candle – he must strike out with his sword. "The pig's neck will be aligned with that of your wife's," he told him, "and that is the spot where you must strike. And you must strike hard, for the neck of a pig is much thicker than that of a man's."

The prince obediently did as he was told, and went to bed, sword in hand. He was almost in danger of falling asleep himself, until the noises started. Those horrible blood curdling sounds he hated so much. "I shall be rid of thee forever," he screamed, and leaping from his bed, he brought his sword down with all of his might, onto the spot where he judged the animal's neck to be – and silence reigned. He called for the guards to bring light into the room; on doing so, he made a horrific discovery. Of The Night Pig, there was no sign, only the decapitated, bloodied body, of his beloved wife. "Ah well," he sighed, as indifferently as if he had just spilled a goblet of his favourite wine, "Accidents will happen."

There was no state funeral for the poor unfortunate princess; death had cruelly demoted her in status back to that of a lowly peasant girl. Which effectively meant she could not be interred within the palace grounds. So, one dark December morning, her body, along with her head, was unceremoniously thrown into an unmarked grave – several miles away from the palace grounds. Two months later, after another whirlwind romance, the prince remarried – this time to a girl of noble birth. He (of course) was never troubled with, or heard from the Night Pig again, because… his new wife didn't snore – and he slept happily ever after

Sun-Up

"Good morning, Tom," greeted Tom's wife when he came downstairs to breakfast. Tom said nothing save for a grunting noise, he didn't even give her a second glance as he put his coat on ready to go to work. "Goodbye," she called after him as he walked out of the house.

"Good morning, Tom," welcomed Mr Patel the newsagent when Tom entered his shop. Tom only nodded, spun around and advanced to the bus stop.

"Good morning, Tom," smiled the cheerful bus driver as Tom boarded his vehicle; his greeting fell on deaf ears as did his goodbye when Tom alighted.

"Good morning, Tom," acknowledged the smartly dressed commissionaire as he opened the main doors to the office block where Tom worked. This too was ignored, and Tom walked straight past him towards the lift.

Instead of getting out of the lift on the seventh floor where he worked, Tom stayed on to the top floor, he then ascended two flights of stairs to the roof. Letting himself on to the roof itself with his security key, he walked directly to the parapet at the front of the building and unceremoniously threw himself off.

"Good God!" cried the commissionaire as Tom's body smashed on to the concrete forecourt.

"Good morning, Tom," cackled the devil warmly, from within the bowels of his Darkdom.

The Quest

Although still only a child when he set off on his barefoot quest for the magic elixir, Mordicai knew that he was venturing to a place where only a few brave men had dared to tread before. He also knew he was compelled to go; for he was the chosen one. Chosen, but not for any past undertakings or crusades he had made. Nor was it because he had been schooled in the ancient ways, it was simply the fact that of the three sons of old mother Galdragon – he was the last one left alive.

From looking at a drawing in the great book of his ancestors that his mother had shown to him, Mordicai knew exactly what this sacred potion he must find looked like; and he knew precisely where to find it. He still didn't fully understand quite what it was, of course. But because he truly believed that his poor mother had been cursed by some evil warlock, or the like, he was convinced that it was the only thing that could cure her, and bring her back to normal. So, laden down with a heavy heart, he kissed his elderly mother on the cheek, and bade her goodbye. Promising her, that no matter what happened, he would return with the miraculous mixture.

With the words, 'always be on your guard against surprise,' ringing in his ears. Mordicai set off on the first quarter of his expedition, which was by far the easiest, safest part of the journey. The Aligned Apex, as this sector was known, offered little in the way of real danger itself. But this was only a precursor, designed to lead him into a false sense of security. Fully aware of this, and with a determined step, he stole forward until he reached the Twisted Stairway of the Inner Sanctum which was undeniably fraught with danger. Indeed it was on this very same descent, some years earlier, that one of his brothers had lost his life. As surefooted as a mountain goat, but twice as cautious, he began his own descent, cleverly avoiding all the potentially fatal hazards set before him. The air was heavy, and the terrain cold and severe to his feet, but he pressed on. So determined was he to get down, that even the infamous Fluttering Veil of the Aperture couldn't stop him from reaching the bottom. But now he had to traverse the Corridor of Despair.

It was dank and dark, and everything spoke of death. But rising once more to the occasion, and singing as he went, he bravely proceeded onward.

The song that he sang seemed to endow him with all the extra strength, and willpower, he needed to soldier on. It was almost as if he'd been transformed into one those heroes of Greek legend. Which was just as well, because it gave him the power to overcome all the obstacles that the Corridor of Despair put in his way. Then finally, with only one quarter of his odyssey left to go, he reached the portal of the deadliest place of all – The Temple of Screaming Skillets.

The heat and light from within the temple was as hot and bright as the sun itself. Fearlessly stepping into this environment of heterogeneous objects, he was immediately confronted by an expanse of clinging membrane which almost caught him off guard. But thankfully, not completely. To the uninitiated, this malleable membrane can seem like a harmless substance but, if allowed to take hold, it can suffocate a person to death in seconds. It does this by clinging to their face and obstructing their facial orifices, thus preventing them from breathing in or exhaling. But to the alert mind, and dextrous fingers of young Mordicai, it posed little or no threat at all. Dangers in this vile and dastardly domain were manyfold, but he dismissed them all with contempt. Through squinted eyes, he scanned the chamber for the object he was seeking. Then at long last his search was over. For there in a secluded corner, perched high on its throne of iron, singing vaporous songs of dissolution, sat The Spouted Cauldron of Death. Now all he had to do, was draw forth its magical extract.

Curiously enough, even though this metal monster held on to its turbulent waters like a selfish samovar, it would in strange contrast also use the same liquid, usually in the form of scalding steam, as a warning to anyone who got too close to it. Unperturbed, and well prepared, the boy grabbed one of the many earthenware goblets positioned around the place; he knew that they held key ingredients which were imperative to the magic elixir. Next, and in great danger of serious harm to himself. He managed to tilt the great cauldron forward, which in turn caused its contents to spew forth. As quick as a flash, he allowed part of this measure to flow into his goblet before stepping back to safety. At last he had got what he came for, but his quest wasn't over yet, he still had to make the perilous journey back to his mother's bedside.

Mordicai may have only been a child when he embarked on this Homeric quest, but after having triumphed over the multitude of fiendish impediments that had defeated so many before him he was now, most definitely, a man.

Full of confidence, and flushed with success, he turned to retrace his steps. Nothing, and he meant nothing, was going to stop him now. Like a tiger, so intent on its quarry that it ignores all of its surroundings, he sprang, ran, swerved and bounded his way through the hostile territories, until at last he arrived breathless beside the maternal one.

Old mother Galdragon had been continually drifting in and out of consciousness ever since he'd been gone, and was on the point of delirium. Even now, though she could clearly see him standing before her, she couldn't be sure if he was real, or merely a figment of her imagination; until he spoke.

"Mother, dear Mother," he whispered, "I have it here," and he held the goblet aloft for her to see. Then placing the drink on an altar by her bedside, he gently helped her to sit up into a more comfortable position. He then held the goblet to her lips, and allowed the infusion to cascade down her poor parched throat. The effect was immediate, and obvious; almost magical.

Turning her head towards her son, and with a smile on her lips, and a tear in her eye, she proudly proclaimed, "Mordicai, that was the best cup of tea I've ever had in my life."

Turn of Events

Harry was feeling in a good mood as he thumbed his way through the Sunday papers, he had just taken a bite out of his slice of toast when he spotted it; a neat little advert in its own box. *Good or bad, what was the big event that changed your life?* asked the advert, followed in brackets by, *no day I met my wife stories, marriages, or child births please*. The promotion ran on, 'We are a TV company looking for people with an unusual tale to tell on a big event in their lives, if you think you have a story that we may be interested in please call in confidence on the following number…' Harry copied the number down and dialled. It was a recording of course, but he left his details anyway, replaced the receiver and got on with his day. By the time Thursday came it had completely slipped his mind, so he was slightly taken aback when on answering his phone a stranger's voice waffled on about interviews and things. He did however eventually manage to make sense of it all, and at the end of the conversation he had made himself an appointment for 2 p.m. on the following Sunday at the city's Paramount Hotel.

It was 3.15 before Harry actually got his interview, the first hour or so had been spent filling in forms and idling his time away waiting in the bar. The scene that met his eyes as he entered the room set aside for evaluations was reminiscent of a military courtroom – one long and highly polished wooden table sat squarely in the middle of the floor, with three rather tired and sombre looking men sat behind it; facing them was one fairly ominous and mastermind-like leather chair for him to sit on. He sat down, smiled, and waited for one of the other men to speak first.

"Mr Harry Seaweight?" inquired the man in the centre looking up from the application form in front of him.

"Yes, sir," replied Harry, half thinking, I wish I hadn't bothered now.

The centre man stood up, smiled cordially, and holding his hand out as a friendly gesture to Harry he apologised, "I'm sorry about the delay but we're running a bit late. My name's Steve Bannion and these two gents are my colleagues, Alf Curran and Sean Debenham."

The two sitting men joined their standing friend, and they also shook Harry's hand.

The formal introduction over with, Steve Bannion spoke again, "Okay, Mr Seaweight," he said warmly, "I've had a quick glance at your application but, what I'd like now is for you in your own words, and in your own time, to tell us all about yourself and this big event in your life."

Shifting slightly uncomfortably in his seat, Harry began, "Well a week last Saturday—"

"Whoa, excuse me a second," interrupted Mr Bannion, "I'm sorry for the interjection, but I don't think you fully understand what it is we want. You see for us to be able to measure how great an effect this event has had on your life; we need to know more about you yourself. For instance, an incident that could have a life-changing effect on one person, might not have the same effect on another, and vice versa of course. So the more we know about you the better; I suppose it's my own fault really for not explaining properly to you in the first place."

"Shucks that's alright," drawled Harry, "I know what you mean now, but mine's such an oddball story I'm not really sure where to begin."

"I find the beginning's always a good place to start," quipped Steve Bannion with a look of amusement rather than sarcasm on his face.

"Very well then," began Harry, "but I think it best that I tell you now – because you'll only ask me afterwards anyway, that some of the facts I'm about to tell you were unknown to me at the time they took place, and I only learned of them myself years later. Right, now I've got that out of the way I'll begin. The first two years of my life were spent in an orphanage in Wales until I was adopted out, apparently the young couple that adopted me were both do-gooder types, and they spent much of their time doing some kinda charity work in the foothills of Eastern China; so it was only natural that they took me with them the next time they went. The bulk of their work was carried out on the move, if you know what I mean, camping out here and there in the wilds for a couple of days at a time. Everything was going fine until one fateful summer's evening, a year after arriving there, they were attacked and murdered by a gang of marauding bandits. I was of course spared, but left on my own to fend for myself. They probably presumed that I would either starve to death or get eaten by wild animals – I did neither. I'm not entirely sure about the time factor here but, it was definitely months rather than days that I somehow managed to survive on my own; some people even said I had been looked after by a family of wolves. Whether this was true or not I don't know, but I do know that even if it was true, the wolves couldn't have treated me any worse than the old peasant that found me did.

"Why he even bothered to take me home with him is still a bit of a mystery, because I was obviously still much too young to do any physical work to earn my keep, and he was so much of a miser that he only fed me the bare minimum of food, just enough to keep me alive – sometimes even having to share this with the dogs. I was treated like an animal, and eventually I began to act like one too. For four long years I endured this life, then came the Americans, with the Americans came hope; although this was soon dashed when they too locked me in a cage every night."

Steve Bannion and his colleagues looked at each other in stunned disbelief, but they said nothing and allowed Harry to continue. "I was, within a few days and with a great deal of secrecy, shipped off to America where, to my dismay I spent a further two years travelling the country in a freak show as the Wolf Boy. The only good thing about this period was, along with other things, I managed to gain the beginnings of an education. It was only after FBI intervention that I finally

found freedom, closely followed by integration, adoption, and American citizenship. Life with my new American family, although a vast improvement on my life so far, was a hectic one – they were forever flying to different parts of the world, and of course they took me with them everywhere they went. Time quickly passed and two months after my nineteenth birthday, or what had been designated as my birthday, I was conscripted into the army and sent to Vietnam. Twelve more months of sheer hell followed; which included twice being bitten by poisonous snakes, until I finally managed to stop a bullet which brought about an abrupt end to my army career. I was forced through injury to spend a few months in a military hospital before being allowed to return home; the only thing was, when I did eventually arrive home, there was nobody there to greet me. Not surprising really, when I discovered that my adopted parents had been sentenced to life imprisonment for drug smuggling—"

"I don't believe this," interrupted Steve Bannion once again.

"It's all damn well true," defended Harry, sounding hurt that his word was being doubted. "I've got documentation and old newspaper clippings to prove it."

"No-no, please don't misunderstand me I don't mean it quite so literally," apologised Steve for the third time, "I'm not in any way doubting you, I just mean your story, it's so mind-bogglingly fantastic to say the least. It truly is the type of stuff that films are made of, anyway I'm sorry, please continue and I'll try not to interrupt you again."

"Fed up to the back teeth with my life," continued Harry with a vengeance, "I decided to emigrate, or reintegrate, or whatever you call it, back to Great Britain. I'd only been here a few days when fate struck again. I was having a leisurely walk up and down Cardiff's city centre one day, just snooping around – a sort of poor man's sightseeing tour if you like, when I heard a noise from behind me. I spun round just in time to collide with one of three guys who were running in my direction. I was forcibly, and as it turned out, painfully knocked to the ground by one of them, but he kept his balance somehow and managed to keep on running. 1 may be disabled but there's nothing wrong with my hearing, and at the point of collision I heard the man drop something on the rock-hard cobbles that lined the back alley up which I'd wandered. Picking myself up first, I then picked up the object that the running guy had dropped; it was a hand-gun. Talk about timing – because it was also at this precise moment that the cops chose to strike – police cars, with their blue lights flashing and sirens wailing, came hurtling towards me from both ends of the street. Before I knew what was happening, I was trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey and unceremoniously thrown into the back of a police van. Thirty minutes later, and in spite of my protests, I found myself in an icy cold police cell with nothing but a smile and a paper suit to keep me warm. It was three months before the case eventually came to court, I was charged with armed robbery, found guilty and sentenced to twelve years imprisonment. The real perpetrators of the crime apparently had had strong American accents; unfortunately for me so did I at the time, so to the courts it was a foregone conclusion. Another three years of my life were wasted before my name was eventually cleared and I was released, and not a penny compo either; a legal technicality they said. With a little

help from the authorities I managed to find a place to live, within another week I had a job of work, normality at last; that's when I met Rebecca."

Harry stopped speaking for a second to compose himself, he was obviously feeling emotional. Taking a deep breath he continued with his address.

"We enjoyed what I think most people call a whirlwind romance and within three months of our first meeting we were married; I had at last found happiness, or so I thought. We desperately wanted a child but, no matter how hard we tried, or how often we visited the fertility clinic, she just couldn't get pregnant. Then out of the blue, a full decade after we were wed, she told me she was expecting. Words couldn't even begin to explain how happy I felt, which was just as well because when she presented me with triplets nine months later – I was totally speechless. I looked on it like this, God was making it up to us for all the barren years by giving us three sons in one go. Five years down the line and tragedy intervened again; Ricky, the oldest (by two minutes) of my sons, was involved in a road traffic accident and needed an emergency blood transfusion. As I was already on the scene I immediately offered my own blood; can you imagine my pain when I was informed that I was the wrong blood group. I was not the children's biological father; we had all been living a lie for five whole years, and Rebecca had known all along. As cruel as this may sound to you, I just couldn't, even though I still loved the boys, face living with them again, and I've been on my own ever since."

Steve Bannion leaned back in his chair and looked at both his colleagues, "I don't know about you two," he said, "but that is the most amazing story I've ever heard in my life and I doubt that anyone else has heard any better too." Turning back to Harry he predicted, "I can I think, without fear of contradiction, guarantee that we will go with your story. As a matter of fact the only problem we've got is; because you've had that many different big events in your life, choosing which one to go with. Which one would you suggest yourself?"

"What out of that lot? None, I wouldn't go with any of them, they're not what I came here to tell you about."

"You what!" exploded Steve with a dramatic drop in the level of his grammar, "If none of them are the big event in your life, just what the bloody hell is?"

"Well it's like I tried to tell you in the first place, a week last Saturday I got three numbers up on the lottery and—"

"Three numbers! Three poxy numbers – what the hell has winning a paltry little tenner got to do with it?"

"I'll tell you then," smiled Harry, "it's quite easy really, you see with all the crap that's happened to me in my life, I thought it's about time I had a bit of good luck, and I think winning something for once with no comebacks is not only a big event, it's a bloody miracle too, wouldn't you agree?"

Guess Who

Demitri Koussos settled himself in a comfortable seat by the window with a full ten minutes to spare, he was pleased it was one of those old-fashioned corridor type trains, and not one of those new-fangled open plan how-do-you-do's. It would be a good three-hour trip to Redding he reckoned, but you never know, he thought to himself as in way of compensation, with a bit of luck I may just have the compartment all to myself for the entire journey. It was a short-lived dream, because it was at this point when the door to his compartment slid back and three rather earnest looking Roman Catholic priests stepped in.

For the first hour or so of the journey Demitri was content to stare out of the carriage window watching the fields and telegraph poles flash past at umpteen miles a hour, then, and only then did he begin to pay any attention to his three fellow passengers. Two of them were sitting together, legs almost touching on one side of the compartment, and the other one was sat facing them, sharing, but further along, the same seat as himself. The three of them with heads huddled together were so engrossed in their own conversation that they seemed oblivious to his presence; not one happy to be on the periphery of a good debate, he decided to attract their attention and at the same time possibly be invited to join in with their confab. So as a ploy he palmed a pound coin from his pocket and stooped down to the foot of the nearest priest to him, then rising again with the coin clearly visible between his thumb and index finger he said, "Excuse me, father, I think you've just dropped this."

The priest, a pale and thin looking man with fly-away hair, turned to him and patting his pockets at the same time replied, "I don't remember doing so, my son, but as there is no one else here and it's obviously not yours, I must have done," so thanking him with an ingratiating nod, he took the money from him and popped it into his own pocket, then, which was positively annoying for Demitri, he quietly turned his attention back to his two colleagues.

Demitri felt a silent rage inside; snobs, he thought, they're nothing but snobs. It was then that one of the other priests produced a pipe and asked, "You don't mind if I smoke this do you? I know some people find it offensive so I always like to ask first."

"No you're alright, carry on."

He watched as the man lit his pipe, the smoke from which wreathed upwards like a North American Indian's smoke signal; he didn't really like the smell of tobacco but, the open window

was admitting a breeze so it wasn't too bad. Once again he turned his attention back to the blurring topography that flew past the window, and once again his mind drifted away to another time and another place; that was until he realised someone was trying to attract his attention with one of those annoyingly false half coughs, which as it happened was one of his pet hates.

"Ahem ahem," went the third priest,

Christ he thought, all three of them have managed to get up my nose now.

"Excuse us for seeming so rude won't you, my son," apologised the churchman, "I thought it may seem a little odd to you that three men of the cloth like ourselves should be crouched together like this in a railway carriage. But the truth of the matter is a great deal simpler and less sinister than it looks. Whenever, which is quite often I may add, we have to travel anywhere together, we like to take advantage of the situation and play a few rounds of our own favourite word game. Not that you have to be an academic to play it, or even a cleric if it comes to that, but we do find it goes over most people's heads – that's why we tend to keep it to ourselves."

Demitri felt insulted, he also felt like saying the only way you three could go over my head would be in an aeroplane, but he didn't. Instead he chose to play it cool, and in a slightly sarcastic but most respectful manner he said, "It just so happens that I hold degrees in English, history, and maths, and consider myself to be reasonably educated, though I must admit that when it comes to word games I am a little bit wet behind the ears. But although I say it myself, I am a quick learner, so if you would be kind enough to allow me to listen in to your game, you never know I might just glean enough info to learn how to play it. As it happens I'm only going as far as Redding, so the chances of me actually getting a game in before we get there are pretty slim, but not impossible. So please, just pretend I'm not here and carry on regardless."

The pale thin priest spoke first, "Of course you can listen in, my son, and I'll tell you what, if it's agreeable to my colleagues here I'll give you a quick rundown on the rules."

The other two priests nodded in agreement.

"Well basically it's a guessing game," continued the Holy man, "one of us thinks of someone famous from history and the other two have to guess who it is, in our case it's usually a religious figure but it doesn't have to be. To help them guess, you have to give clues to the identity of the person, but no more than ten at a time. If someone guesses it correctly then it's their turn to be on, and they have to think of somebody, but if after the maximum ten clues they still don't guess it, then you tell them the answer and think of someone else – pretty simple on the face of it?"

Demitri nodded as a gesture of understanding.

"Right," said the pale priest turning to his friends, "it's still my turn so I'll begin. This famous person I'm thinking of had a sister called Miriam—"

"Moses, it's Moses isn't it?" jumped in pipe man before the other even had time to finish.

"Yes, yes it is, good grief that was quick, I think that must be a record."

The praise they heaped on him was ridiculous, you would have thought he'd just answered the last question on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*.

"My turn now," announced pipe man with enthusiasm, "this person of mine always insisted that his appointed mission in life was to teach the word of Christ to non-Jews—"

"Paul, it's got to be Paul," cried Mr false cough excitedly. "Yes you're quite correct but, oh my goodness that was quick of you, it's a toss-up who was fastest – you or Father Bryant." Again they heaped praise on each other like hysterical drama queens, and so the game continued, the lead going from one to another in an almost continuous circle. Demitri watched and listened as the three priests went on with their childish game, cringing inside with embarrassment every time they went into back-slapping mode. I know how to take the wind out of their sails, he thought to himself; taking one of his business cards from his wallet he wrote a name on the blank side of it and pushed it into his top pocket.

The train was rapidly approaching Redding station so Demitri had to act quickly, "Excuse me," he interrupted politely, "but I'm getting off at the next stop and I've thought of a really good one for your game, and I think you'll enjoy it. So with your permission I'd like to pose a question for you, even if I am out of turn."

"No, you're quite alright," answered the priests almost in unison, "go on."

"Okay then," he began, "but before you guess at my mystery person please let me give you all of the ten clues first."

"As you wish," agreed the priests.

"This person lived, or let's say he was supposed to have lived, more than two thousand years ago. He said, and most people believed, that he was the son of God—"

"This is too simple," broke in pipe man, "we are all devoted theologians here, and even if we weren't, well the biggest fool in Christendom would know the answer to that. If you want to catch us out I suggest you think of someone else, my son."

"I assure you that the person I mean and the one you are thinking of are two completely different people," smiled Demitri, cocksure of himself. "Before I started I did ask you to let me give you all ten clues before you had a guess; the train is nearly at my stop now and I've got to get off, so please nourish the child within me and let me finish."

"He's right," agreed pale face, "let him finish," but it was said more in the way of consolation than anything else, because he too believed that Demitri had got it wrong.

"Right, the third clue is: It is also said that this man's birth mother was a mortal woman.

"Fourth clue: When this man was a baby a very powerful and influential person tried to have him killed; they failed.

"Fifth clue: He was renowned for frequently standing up to what he believed were unjust authorities.

"Sixth clue: He was, and still is associated with the number twelve."

The three ministers looked at each other in disbelief, they couldn't believe their ears, each one of them was thinking that this man before them had taken leave of his senses; but they said nothing and let him continue.

"Seventh clue: On at least one occasion he lost his temper, and caused to a temple what today could only be described as criminal damage.

"Eighth clue: He performed a great many miraculous deeds in his lifetime.

"Ninth clue: He once very famously sought solace on his own in the wilderness.

"Final clue: His death was unnatural and premature, and it's said that after his demise he went and sat by the right-hand side of his father – God."

No sooner had he finished speaking when the train pulled into Redding station, "I'm getting off now," he announced, then taking the business card from his top pocket he said, "I've written the answer on the back of this card and I'll leave it here on the seat for you, so when you've finished guessing you can check your answers. It's been nice talking to you but I must go now, so I'll bid you all good day," with that he promptly left the train.

The three priests sat in complete silence for a minute until Father Bryant broke the lull, "I don't think that young man was quite right in the head," he said shaking his own head, "it's quite obvious who he was talking about."

"Yes," concurred pipe man, "but he seemed so adamant that it wasn't; so why not, just out of curiosity, have a look and see what it says on the card."

Father Bryant picked the card up and turned it over to see what Demitri had written, he almost fainted when he read the answer, for there in big black capital letters was the name 'Hercules'. Good Lord, he thought, I didn't expect that. You see as a young man he had himself studied Greek mythology, and although he had never compared the two together before, he knew everything that Demitri had said was true; but it would never do to let his colleagues know that.

He looked into the benign innocent faces of his two companions whose eyes were simply imploring him to read out the name on the card, and made a hurried but far-reaching decision. So, making a mental note that he would most definitely have to go to the confessional for the lie he was about to tell, he deliberately tossed the card out of the window and said, "I told you that young man wasn't quite right in the head didn't I?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because it said on the card exactly what we thought it would. Right, who's turn is it now?"

The Old Man of Smedley Vale

It was mid July when Thomas Squibb hopped on the train for East Sussex, he was looking forward with relish to his hard-earned hiking holiday. After spending most of the year toiling away for eight hours a day in the suffocating atmosphere of his city centre forge where he makes such things as wrought iron gates and security grilles etc., there is nothing he loves more than to walk the narrow winding footpaths and byways of the English countryside.

It was late afternoon by the time he booked into the Smedley Vale Hotel. After unpacking he showered, took forty winks, then made his way downstairs just in time for his evening meal.

Explaining to the chef that he likes to spend his days walking, and that he may not be back in time for dinner, he asked if it was possible for him to have a packed lunch to take out; the chef assured him that it would.

Later that evening he decided to spend some time in the bar; it was quiet as bars go, no jukebox or background music, and the half dozen or so regulars there seemed to speak in whispers. He chatted with the barman, who as it happened was also the chef, and pretty soon, as in bars throughout the land, the conversation turned to that of the supernatural. Knowing how country folk like to wind townies up, Thomas thought he'd nip this conversation in the bud. "Look," he said in a firm but friendly voice, "before you go any further, I do not, and I never will, believe in ghosts, goblins, or whatever; so if you don't mind let's change the subject."

"I was only going to warn you about the old man of Smedley Vale," defended the barman, "but if you don't believe, well you don't believe then, and that's an end to it."

The conversation turned to another subject, and a short while later Thomas retired to bed.

The next morning after breakfast Thomas collected his sandwiches and, together with all his other hiking gear, he set off for what he hoped would be an interesting day's walking; it was, but not in the same way as he had hoped.

One road was as good as the next to him, so of the four lanes that formed the crossroads where the hotel stood, he went left, roughly judging it to be west. He enjoyed taking in the sights and sounds of the countryside on his walks, stopping only occasionally to observe the wildlife in its

natural habitat. Time always seemed to fly by on his walks, just as it did on this day and, checking his watch, he realised that it was already 3.30 p.m., time for a bite to eat.

The lane he was on was steep and narrow with high hawthorn hedges on either side of it; he decided to wait until he'd reached the bottom of the vale before eating his lunch. It was only when he reached the bottom that he spotted him – a wizen faced old man with gnarled hands, whose unkempt grey wispy hair was reminiscent of an ill-fitting wig on a pig. This loathsome creature in front of him was dressed in clothes of a bygone age and holding one end of a thick rope in his leathery hands, the other end of the rope passed through the middle of the hedge. Strangely enough, even though it was quite warm and the sun was still shining, Thomas felt a distinct chill run through his body which made him shiver. Without speaking, the old man indicated to him that he wanted him to help pull on the rope; the hedge was much too dense to see through, and far too high to see over, so he had no idea what was on the other end of the rope.

Humping big lumps of wrought iron about for a living, Thomas was no weakling, but try as he might he could not budge the rope. This has got to be some kind of wind-up, he thought to himself, so he threw down the end of the rope and said to the old man, "Pull it yourself," and with that he turned to walk away; taking advantage of the fact that Thomas had his back to him, the old man kicked him up the backside.

We have all seen people kicked up the bum in comedy films, even young children do it playfully to each other; but there was nothing remotely funny about this particular kick up the pants.

It was exacted with so much force and venom that it sent Thomas's burly body sprawling on to the ground. He realised straight away that he had been injured, but being an ex-boxer, he managed to put the pain behind him and jumped up to deliver a bit of venom and force himself. To his amazement the old man and the rope had disappeared, he could see in both directions of the lane for a good distance, so there was no way the old man could have gone either of those ways, but the hedges were too high and impregnable for him to have gone that way too; he seemed to have vanished into thin air. As his anger subsided the pain returned, making walking almost impossible, so reaching for his mobile phone from his pocket he rang the hotel for help; it was the chef who drove out to pick him up. All the chef would say when Thomas told him about his misadventure was, "I did try to warn you about him, but you wouldn't listen."

"I hope you're not trying to tell me that a hobgoblin or some other such creature has done this to me are you?" snapped Thomas angrily.

"Hobgoblin, spiteful spectre, old man of Smedley Vale, call him what you like, there's nothing you can do about it."

"I'll go to the police."

"You can if you like, but it will come to nothing. Oh sure they'll go through the motions of making a report out and promise to investigate, but they won't. You see even though they know all about the old man, they can't officially declare that such creatures exist, so it will end up in the bin with all the others."

"All the others, what others… just how many others have there been?"

"Hard to say really, over the years I've heard of dozens, but there's probably a hell of a lot more, you see not everyone reports it. I know it might sound silly to you, but through either embarrassment or fear of being disbelieved, some people keep it to themselves and say nothing."

Bubbling in silent rage aggravated by pain, Thomas challenged this head chef and bottle washer to tell him all he knew about this malevolent wretch.

Falling silent for a few seconds to collate his thoughts, the chef began, "Well there's not a lot more that I can tell you about him apart from what he does, and you're already painfully aware of that. I mean there's no history to tell you about why he does what he does, it's not like a ghost story where you can say so-and-so died there years ago and now they haunt the place. In fact, apart from that he will only appear to people who are on their own, usually strangers, and that if you try to grab hold of him he disappears, you know as much about him as I do. Mind you, I always try to warn people about him, so what I usually tell any tourists stopping at the hotel is, like I tried to tell you, that if you ever see a strange looking old man on the vale, never, not even for one second, turn your back on him."

They continued the rest of the way in silence and, following a sleepless night lying on his stomach, Thomas cut short his holiday and returned home.

"I'm afraid you've got a badly bruised coccyx, Mr Squibb," informed the doctor from the local hospital that Thomas visited on his return home. Seeing the puzzled look on his face the doctor added, "That's the base of your spine, and all I can do is prescribe painkillers and give you this," reaching into the drawer of his desk the doctor handed him a small rubber ring which looked like a miniature lifebuoy.

"I hope that's not for what I think it's for is it, Doctor?"

"Well if you think it's for sitting on, then it is; you see this will protect your coccyx from coming into contact with any hard surfaces when you sit down. I know you will probably find it embarrassing at first having to carry it around with you, but there will be times when you'll be glad of it, believe you me."

He was right of course, but as far as Thomas was concerned, this was only adding insult to injury, and there was no way in the world that he was going to let the old man of Smedley Vale get away with it; even if he is a hobgoblin or not.

In the weeks and months that followed, his injury eventually healed; but not his damaged pride. He took to visiting the armoury dept of a nearby museum; although already a master craftsman of metals in his own right, there were still things he could learn from the craftsmen of old.

Working from the notes he had taken at the museum, he devoted most of his weekends to labouring away on this secret project of his; of course he had many failures, but after spending hour after hour locked in his own workshop he finally succeeded in developing his secret weapon. Almost twelve months to the day since his last visit, he once again set off for East Sussex, but this time in his own car and with a certain something safely locked in the boot.

Although he had grown a beard and shaved his head, the chef recognised him immediately he walked into the foyer of the Smedley Vale Hotel. Not a good sign, he thought to himself, but he had

spent considerably more time with the chef than he had done with the arse-kicker; and it was the latter that he didn't want to recognise him. He passed the evening away in the bar, deliberately avoiding the subject of the old man, he still wasn't one hundred per cent convinced that the old man was a supernatural being; and he didn't want to give any secrets away.

The next morning after breakfast, he went back up to his room and collected his brainchild from out of the wardrobe where he had hidden it; and what a brainchild it was – a wonderfully sleek pair of wrought iron underpants. He had fashioned them in the same way that armourers of old had made their suits of armour, in long thin strips of iron each one overlapping the next; only Thomas's were made of much sterner stuff. They were heavy and uncomfortable to wear and walking was difficult, but he had been practising for months, and was now capable of performing even the most complicated of movements in them. Next he put on his specially made extra large tracksuit bottoms, ideal for concealing things, then very carefully, he drove his car to the top of Smedley Vale and parked up.

At first he didn't spot the old man as he edged his way gingerly from the top to the bottom of the vale; but he was there alright, rope in hand as before. When the miscreant indicated to him to help pull on the rope, Thomas unleashed a torrent of verbal abuse on him like you've never heard in your life before, "You little freak," he called him, "I've wiped better off my shoes than you, you're so ugly you'd make a pig sick, why don't you crawl back under the rock you came from and die," with that he turned his back on the old man.

This was it, crunch time, would the old goat take the bait? Yes he did, the kick came. It didn't hurt him but he still felt it, and it was delivered with enough force to propel Thomas a couple of inches forward; but it was the excruciating scream that told him his plan had worked, and the sound of it warmed the cockles of his heart. Spinning round, he was delighted with the sight that met his eyes; the old man was hopping about on one foot whilst clutching the other foot in his hands, and perpetrating an agonising roar at the same time.

With a well-aimed kick of his own, he launched the decrepit creature several feet into the air; he couldn't be sure if he had kicked him over the hedge or not, but the old man most definitely disappeared from sight.

All this was several years ago now, and as far as it's known, the old man of Smedley Vale has never been seen again. But pride of place in a glass cabinet in Thomas Squibb's little office, stands a pair of iron underpants, "Just in case," he coos, as he gently pats the glass with his strong artistic hands.

Train of Thought

The circumstances leading up to me being stranded on Scarsdale railway station in the heart of the Cumbrian countryside are too numerous and harrowing for me to go into too much detail about; suffice to say it was a catalogue of missing trains and gratuitous journeys. So here I was, stuck in the middle of nowhere, feeling cold, tired, and hungry, plus I still had a two-hour wait ahead of me until my next train home. Add to this the fact that the only shelter I could find was a draughty old waiting room with no visible signs of heating, well you can imagine the mood I was in. Yet, believe it or not, before my train arrived I would be holding my sides to stop them from hurting me because I laughed so much. Strange as this may seem after just saying that, but you couldn't really describe me as having a particularly good sense of humour, quite the opposite in fact. I'm a rather serious chap by nature, and I don't suppose that I've ever laughed out loud at a joke in my life; but if something tickles my fancy, well there's no stopping me.

Weary with pacing the floor, and too cold to get comfortable on the hard pew-like benches that lined the walls of the waiting room, I thought a spot of reading might take my mind off things and help to pass the time. Not that I'm in the habit of carrying lots of reading material about with me, it was simply the fact that the whole of the waiting room floor was strewn with old newspapers that gave me the idea. Gathering handfuls of them up I was dismayed to discover that they were all copies of the same paper, a local rag; I presumed that they had been left there for rail passengers to read. Firstly I arranged a pile of them on the hard seats to make it more comfortable for my bum, next I placed a bundle on the floor to put my feet on in the hope that it would stop the cold from the floor striking up through my feet. I then settled back to read.

The Scarsdale Reporter, as the local rag was called, didn't seem to offer much in the way of serious journalism, its contents were confined to reports of forthcoming local events and the odd petty crime. Then I found it – a two-page article on the successful exorcism of the ghost of Scarsdale railway station. I would be a liar if I didn't admit to feeling a little apprehensive on reading this headline, but a quick glance around me and the recollection of the words 'successful exorcism' soon put me at my ease. I won't recount the story verbatim as I read it, but it went something a little bit like this.

For the past twenty-odd years or so there had been untold numbers of reports of a ghostly apparition on Scarsdale station. These reports, mainly from respectable sober members of the rail-travelling public, all agreed on one thing – the spectre was that of a monk. This monk, an extremely pious one at that, according to reports, supposedly always walked about with the cowl of his

cassock up and his hands cupped together in front of his face as in prayer. But here is the strange bit (as though seeing a ghost wasn't strange enough on its own), local historians could find no evidence of a monastery having ever existed in the area, the nearest one being over fifty miles away. Furthermore, the station was over eighty years old, yet the first sightings of the ghost only started some twenty or so years ago. This beggars the question, where had the ghost been until then? Or why had a monk's ghost from bygone days suddenly started to haunt a railway station?

The failure of the local authorities to come up with satisfactory answers to these questions left the doors open to outside investigators, who it must be said, fared no better. It was then decided that the poor ghost must be exorcised, but this action was also doomed to failure; well by official exorcists it was. Apparently it took a sixty-year-old widow woman to sort it out for them. This lady, who the paper referred to as Mrs X, said she could have sorted it out years earlier if she had known; but because she never reads newspapers and very rarely travels by train, she was totally unaware of the case.

Before I go on any further, I must point out that according to the paper, after Mrs X did what she claims she did, the ghost has never been seen or heard of since.

Two months before the date of the newspaper I was reading, Mrs X, due to unforeseen circumstances was forced to take the train to the city. Finding herself in a situation similar to my own, stuck on a railway station with loads of time to kill before her train was due, she brusquely paced from one end of the platform to the other. It was whilst she was pacing up and down that she spotted him – the ghost that is. But unlike all the other witnesses to this phenomena, Mrs X recognised the poor lost soul; it was, she claimed, the ghost of her late husband who had dropped dead more than twenty years earlier on the same platform. I immediately stopped reading, scratched my head and pondered; if what Mrs X said was true, how could so many of these other so-called eye-witnesses mistake the ghost of a twentieth-century man for that of a mediaeval monk in the act of prayer? My mind boggled, I read on for her explanation. Mr X, who was a heavy smoker, had been a member of a train spotting club, and he and his friends were frequent visitors to, among others, Scarsdale railway station. Then one windy day, whilst he and other members of the train spotting club were waiting for a train, he tried to light a cigarette, but before he could manage to accept a light from his friend his heart gave out and he dropped down dead.

So, again according to the paper, we are expected to believe that the only reason for the haunting was the fact that Mr X never got to light his last cigarette. The monk's cowl was casually explained away as the quilted hood of the man's anorak, and his cupped hands weren't a gesture of prayer at all, but merely intended as a shield from the wind to light his fag. Although this is quite funny in itself and brought a smile to my face, the piece that really set me off laughing was the absurd phraseology used by the paper to describe the actual exorcism. It said, Mrs X held a lighted match in-between the ghost's cupped hands, thus enabling it to light that final elusive cigarette, it then added – the apparition disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Nylon Moon

Most eight-year-old children possess a vivid imagination. With some, it's so finely tuned that they invent imaginary friends to play with. But not little Archibald Fotheringay, he was not given to flights of fantasy of any description. On the contrary, he was quite a serious little chappie; quiet and shy, and intellectually head and shoulders above his peers. That is why after a sudden drop in his school grades, his parents (both eminent psychiatrists) became somewhat concerned. When questioned about this unexpected lull in his academic achievements, they were further taken aback by his odd response – strange dreams.

As a psychiatrist, Archibald Fotheringay Senior was used to his patrons putting forth such excuses for their irrational fears. But from his own son? No, this would never do. Addressing him as he would one of his patients, he said, "Come, come now, Archie. We have discussed this before, and I've already explained to you, dreams are meaningless and serve no useful purpose. However, like people, they do have an infancy. Which is nothing more than a mixture of sights and sounds one has accumulated in one's life, no matter how short that may be—"

"I know, Father," interrupted the boy, tearfully, "but this one, it's… it's not like other dreams, it's so real, and it never varies, it's always the same. There's no monsters in it, or anything like that, and I don't really feel threatened by it, yet somehow it's still disturbing."

Having finished what he was saying, and wondering where he'd got the nerve from to interrupt his father like that (something he'd never done in his life before), he stood guiltily by, hands down by his sides, head bowed, gazing at the toes of his shoes.

His father, not one normally given to bouts of soft-heartedness, looked at him lovingly. He could see this was more than just a passing fancy, the boy was too cut up about it for that. So he decided to try a softer approach. "Look, son," he said, placing his arm gently around his shoulder, "would it make you feel better if you told me all the details of this dream of yours, and we discussed it properly, together, man to man?" The boy gulped hard and swallowed, nodded his head, and continued looking down at his shoes.

"Come then," coaxed his father, and taking him by the hand, led him gently into one of the many spacious living rooms that made up the ground floor. After a quick recce of all the furniture available, they sat side by side in the folds of a luxurious soft leather couch. "In your own time," he urged him, desperately trying not to sound condescending.

"Well," young Archie began, "as I said before, the dream is always the same. I'm standing in the entrance hall of a house, a large house; bigger than this one. I'm alone, and I'm wearing my pyjamas, you know, the blue ones."

Mr Fotheringay did, and he made a mental note to replace them; Archie was growing out of his clothes so fast nowadays anyway. "Everything is eerily quiet, and no one is about," pressed on the boy, blissfully unaware of his father's plans to substitute his nightwear. "Then I get this sudden overwhelming urge to go upstairs. I don't want to go, but I can't help myself. The stairs are in the centre of the floor, wide and steep, with two smaller flights leading off to the left and right at the top. I start to climb the stairs, and it's like I'm moving in slow motion, and couldn't go any faster if I tried. At the top, I take the smaller second flight that leads to the left. This then leads me to a long dark corridor with doors along both sides. Half way down the corridor, one of the doors lies wide open, light from the room illuminates that section of the passageway; and it is to this room I feel myself drawn."

The boy, visibly distressed, ceased talking. It was obviously an ordeal for him to recount his nightmare. His father, also distressed at seeing his son's suffering, but knowing it to be for the best, consoled him as best as he could, before adding, "It's okay, son, you're safe here with me, no harm can come to you. Just take your time and get it all out, believe me you'll feel much better for it when you do."

Young Archie, somewhat surprised at this new caring side to his parent that he'd never seen before, continued telling his dream; only now with more confidence. "As I said, I'm drawn down this corridor, I try to resist but I can't. I want to turn around and run away, but I can't. I'm irresistibly pulled towards the open door. Once inside the doorway I scan the room to see what lies within. I can see a large old-fashioned bed, in which lies a white-haired old man. The bed is surrounded by a group of sad looking people; men, women, and children. They can't see me, I don't know how I know this, I just do. But the old man in the bed can see me, this I know for sure, because he sits up in bed and points his finger at me. The others turn to look where he has pointed, but as I already said, somehow I'm invisible to them; they sort of just look straight through me. Then the old man speaks, and they all turn to look back at him. 'Now I know,' shouts the old man in a gravelly voice, and immediately falls back on his bed. Then I wake up. Usually shaking, and I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm really awake. I know this doesn't sound scary when I say it, but it's really upsetting to me as it unfolds, and I always wake up crying."

"There, there, son," whispered Mr Fotheringay as he wiped the tears from his son's cheeks with his handkerchief. "It's over now, you've got it out your system, and in a couple of minutes you'll feel as right as rain."

After allowing his son time to recuperate, Mr Fotheringay began his interpretation of the boy's dream. "Like I said before, Archie, dreams are only a mixture of sights and sounds one has accumulated in one's lifetime. And this includes books, or bits of books which one has read."

He could see his son's demeanour was changing, and his face clearly much more cheerful. Obviously getting the thing off his chest had done him the world of good. So he carried on with his rationalizing of the problem. "You have probably read a book, or seen a film sometime that includes a deathbed scene, because that is what you have just described – a deathbed scene. It's an all too familiar scenario featured in books and plays nowadays. Indeed, just off the top of my head, I can think of a good half dozen famous plays that end the same way. It's an ideal death you see; and the writers know it, that is why they use it so often. I know it's hard for you, being so young, to understand death. But try if you can to imagine it, and compare it to some of the other, more unpleasant ways of dying. You're in bed, comfortable, surrounded by your loved ones. No illnesses, no accidents, no pain, just a simple passing over. I don't mind telling you, son, that when the time comes, I wouldn't mind going that way myself."

"I understand that, Father," put in the boy, "but that's not what I find worrying. It's what the old man says that worries me. What does he mean when he says, 'Now I know?' It's almost as if he's saying I have let him know something, but that's impossible isn't it? I mean, how can I tell him something, when I don't even know what that something is? Which in turn leaves me wanting to know what *he* means. But as I already told you, I always wake up before I can find out. And it's this wanting to know, but being unable to find out that scares me. I feel like it's my duty to know what it is, but because I don't, I get this feeling like something bad is going to happen."

His father, had he heard the same account from one of his patients, would have dismissed it as an irrational fear and accused them of being paranoid. But because it was his own son, and he could see he had really taken it to heart. He chose once more to adopt the softly softly approach. "By gad, Archie," he cried. "I do believe we've got it, and it was staring us in the face all the time. It's that old primeval fear of failure that's causing it."

"Eh?" interjected the boy, with a puzzled look on his face.

"Failure, or as I said, the fear of failure, that's what causing you to have this dream."

"I don't understand, Father," complained the boy, "what do you mean?"

Although it was against Mr Fotheringay's nature to tell an outright lie, he decided (in his son's case at least) that a spot of creative thinking was called for.

Determined to clear his son's head of these silly thoughts forever, he began what he saw as the battle of the minds – it was him versus the nightmares.

"Do you remember that word association game we used to play?" he asked, "where I say a word and you have to say the first thing that pops into your head."

The boy remembered it well, for it had indeed been one of his all time favourite games. But he was a bit nonplussed wondering where all this was leading, so he did the only thing he could think of, and nodded politely.

"Well," his father continued, "this dream and your mind are playing the exact same game, only someone has moved the goalposts. Do you follow me?"

Archie didn't, and it showed. However, this didn't stop his father from continuing.

"It's a classic case of transference," he expounded loudly, as people often do when they experience a eureka moment.

Years of bandying words with people of low self-esteem had made his tongue plausible and clever, so the boy couldn't help but believe what he was hearing. "All these things you see and hear in your dream aren't there to harm you, or warn you about anything. They are merely symbols, or symptoms, of what is going on in your real life – which you have subconsciously transferred to a scene from some film you may have seen sometime. It's easily done, no doubt caused by some underlying dubiety at the back of your mind."

Archie was pleased to hear this and already felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, but he said nothing, and continued listening to his father; he knew better than not to.

Mr Fotheringay, who had not ceased talking, and was unaware that his son had taken a momentary break from listening, continued with his interpretation, "Yes," he went on, "this house in your dreams obviously represents your school in real life, the bedroom your classroom, the old man your teacher, and so on. When the old man says, 'now I know,' he's basically saying that he was just wondering who the brightest pupil in the school was, then, the moment he sees you, it answers his question for him, because it's you, Archie – and deep down you know it. Only you and your conscience are much too modest to openly admit it, and this is what's causing your confusion. Does this make sense to you?"

"Yes," replied the boy, "it really does, and I can already feel the difference. Everything is so much brighter, clearer now." He thanked his father profusely, and came away with a different point of view.

The chat actually did work wonders on him, and his school grades increased dramatically, as did the quality of his young life. That is not to say he never had the dream again, because he did, only now it didn't frighten him anymore – because he had closure, and was free to get on with his life.

As the years passed, Archie achieved a fairly high level of academic success; and could have chosen a career in any number of professions. But, like his parents before him, he chose medicine, although not in the field of psychiatry.

Two days after his twenty-second birthday he was fortunate enough, or perhaps I should say wealthy enough, to be able to open his own practice in one of the more plusher, richer suburbs of London, pandering to the whims of the rich and famous. And it was here where he met his future wife: Dorcas Deanworthy. She initially joined the practice as a junior assistant, but after a whirlwind romance he made her a senior partner by marrying her. Their love, like the practice, flourished. A year to the day after the wedding, Dorcas gave birth to their first child – a boy, whom they named Archibald; as was the custom for the first-born male child in the Fotheringay dynasty.

Although they didn't know it at the time, the birth served as a portent of things to come. And before Dorcas's childbearing days were over, she had produced nine live births and two miscarriages.

The first twenty-five years of their marriage were spent in and around the city of London, and it wasn't until they were in their fifties, that they decided to buy a country home. At first just for weekends and holidays, and a safe haven for their grandchildren; of which there were many, to play safely in. In time, it also became their place of retirement. The house, or manor house, to give it its proper title, stood grim and imposing in an estate of several hundred acres of farmland. But the interior was exactly the opposite to its exterior. Which, excepting for the old wooden staircase in the centre of the hall, was bright, white and new, and could even boast every mod-con that had ever been invented. And it was to this rustic residence they, with the help of a few domestic staff, spent their last few years together.

Their relationship was a healthy one, in more ways than one. For neither of them had suffered a day's illness in their lives, and even when Dorcas succumbed to the inevitable in her mid-eighties, Archibald was still as fit and sprightly as a man half his age. But time eventually catches up with us all, and he was in his ninety-sixth year when he took to his bed for the final time. He knew the end was near, but he wasn't morbid about it, in fact in a strange way he welcomed it. To him the world just wasn't the same place anymore, and he spent most of his time thinking about the past. He thought about Dorcas, and the many happy years they had spent together. He thought about his parents, and the carefree days of his youth. All in all, he concluded, I can't complain, I've had a good life.

Surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, one day, he heard someone say, "It won't be long now, he's sinking fast."

He would have liked to have said something witty in response, but didn't feel like he had the strength. Then suddenly, he was gripped with an overpowering urge to sit up, which he did, using the last ounce of strength left in his body. Breathlessly he pointed to the doorway, and his family turned to see where and what he was pointing at – but saw nothing. But Archie could. He could see the figure of a small boy wearing ill-fitting blue pyjamas. The poor little chap looked lost and frightened, and Archie knew why. It had taken him a lifetime to find out, but at last he understood. "Now I know," he gasped satisfyingly with his dying breath, and fell back on the bed – life extinct.